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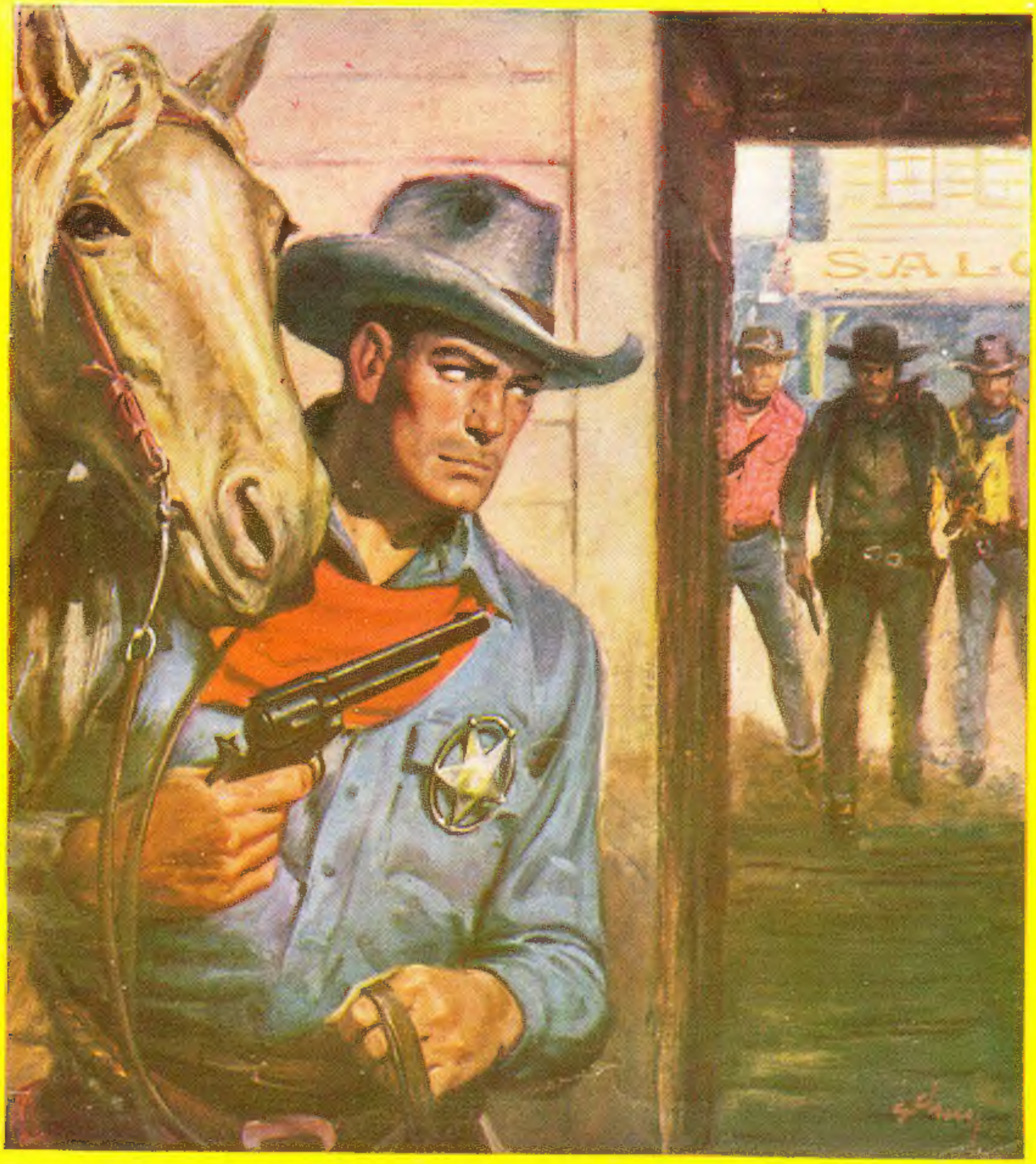

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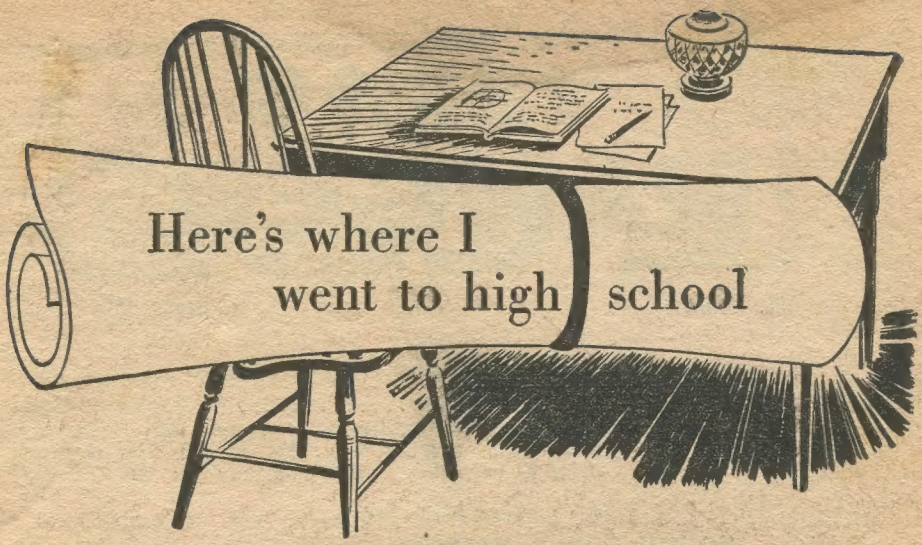

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VOL. 46, No. 1 MARCH, 1952

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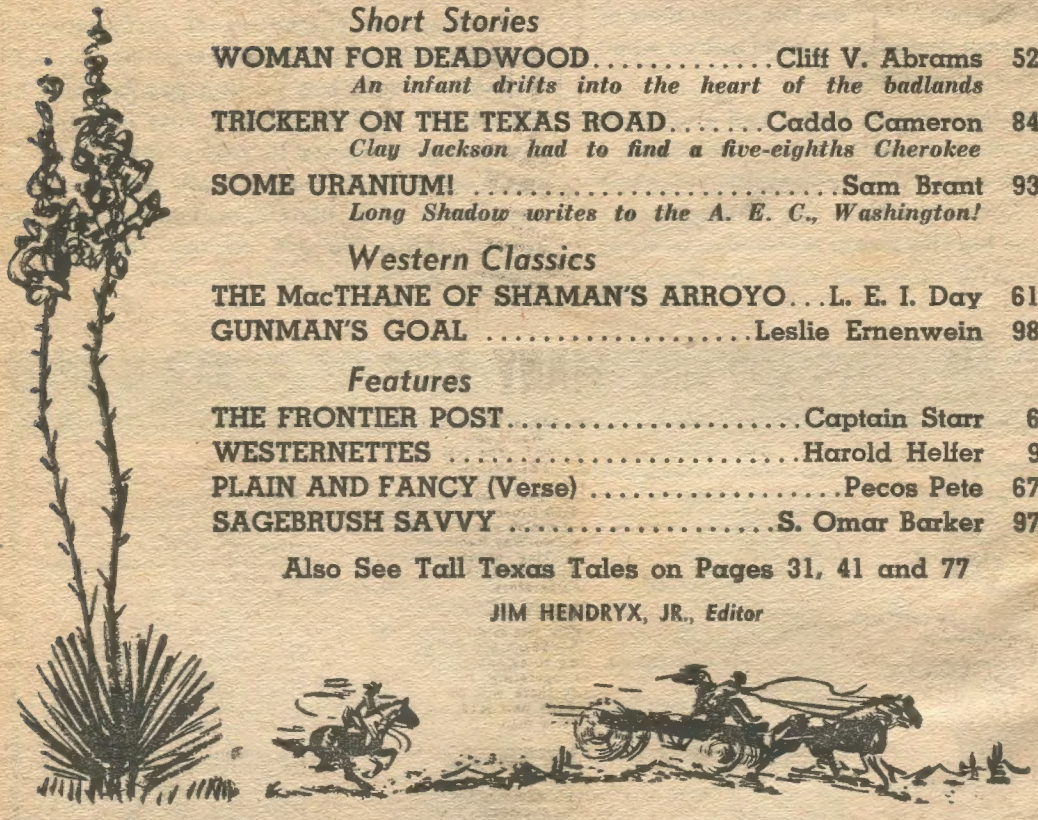
JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



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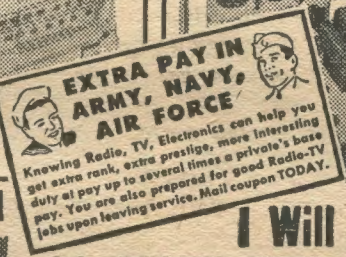
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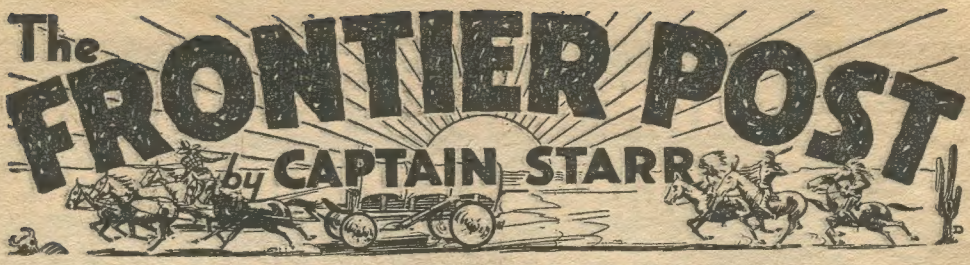

Some Echoes of Bygone Days

THE old ones along the Mexican Border all know him. Speak to them of Tom Doyle and they will say, "Si, senor—he is my friend." Perhaps they will give you a garbled report of Doyle's part in stopping the Bisbee Bunch at Naco during the Escobar Revolution. But Doyle, a ruddy-faced man of 60 whose brown hair shows no gray, won't talk about the Naco fight.

"It would sound like bragging," he objected, "and the Lord hates a braggart."

Which may explain why Tom Doyle was the only American citizen who went unmolested between the federal and rebel lines during the revolution and who was instrumental in crossing upwards of 23,000 head of Mexican cattle during one 4-month period.

Luck and Guts

It took real nerve to operate on the Border in those days when trigger-happy troops on both sides shot first and asked questions later—if at all. The bones of many men, shot on mere suspicion, bleached white on the sun-hammered Sonora hills, and there were those who predicted a like fate for Tom Doyle. They called him loco in the head for believing that his friendship with the Mexican people would keep him from getting a bullet in the back, or being 'dobe-walled by some kill-crazy firing squad.

Asked about his many narrow escapes in those rough-and-tumble days when a man's life was less valued than that of a cow, Doyle said quietly, "I wasn't smart. Just lucky. Looks like I had some divine guidance that took care of me."

Whatever it was—friendship, know-how, or divine guidance—Doyle came through unscathed despite the chances he took riding the danger trails south of the Border.

Nodding at his eleven year old son Luisito who rides with him on many trips these days, Doyle said, "I am truly thankful that I have such a son. Luisito is an altar boy at Sacred Heart Church. I have a fine family."

In his younger days Tom Doyle punched cows for the Babbitt Brothers in California and for the Compania Ganadera de Cananea in Old Mexico. He is one of the few men still living who was personally acquainted with Bill Greene who ran a bunch into the fabulous Greene Cananea Copper Company . . .

"Bill owned a little ranch on the San Pedro," Doyle related. "He had a pack outfit, furnished wood and toted supplies to Fort Huachuca for the army. A Mexican cowboy kept telling Bill about a mountain of red metal in the Maraquita Mountains of Sonora, forty miles south of Naco. Bill didn't pay much attention at first, but finally he had a hunch to give it a looksee. What he saw convinced him, and although he had a difficult time getting the big-money boys interested, Bill succeeded in promoting the necessary financing. That was in 1898 and they've been taking out copper ever since."

The Great Greene

The original shaft was the Chivatera Mine. Now they're operating in the Demacrita shaft and getting enough gold in the ore to pay all operating expenses, so that the copper is clear profit, according to Doyle.

Bill Greene, he recalls, was a big robust, light-complexioned man with blue eyes and a dragoon mustache. "He was very aggressive, did everything on a large scale whether it was buying land, building camps, or borrowing money."

Greene's cattle empire, the Compania Ganadera de Cananea, was one of the largest in the history of the Southwest. One ranch, the ORO, consisted of 86,000 acres. The brand

(Continued on page 112)

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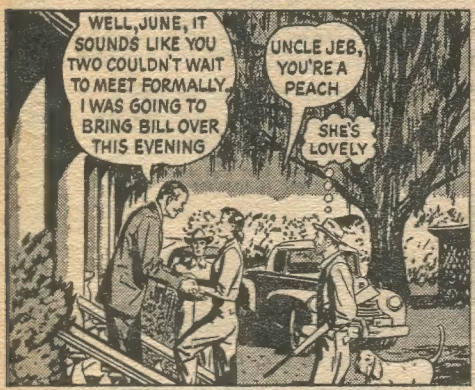
WILD TURKEY HUNTING IN A SOUTHERN NATIONAL FOREST CAN HARDLY BE CLASSED AS A DANGEROUS SPORT, BUT WHEN A WOUNDED WILD BOAR INTRUDES...

WHEN WE BORROWED JEB'S CAR, WE SHOULDA TAKEN HIS TRAILER, TOO
WHY THAT'S JEB SCOTT'S CAR! THEN YOU MUST BE HIS HOUSE GUEST!
THAT'S ME, ALL RIGHT!


WELL, JUNE, IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU TWO COULDN'T WAIT TO MEET FORMALLY. I WAS GOING TO BRING BILL OVER THIS EVENING
UNCLE JEB, YOU'RE A PEACH
SHE'S LOVELY

WHERE HAS THIS BLADE BEEN ALL MY LIFE! THAT'S THE SLICKEST SHAVE I'VE HAD IN YEARS!
THIN GILLETTES ARE MIGHTY POPULAR DOWN HERE. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN

HE'S A FINE YOUNG MAN. EXCELLENT APPEARANCE AND VERY INTELLIGENT
I KNEW YOU'D LIKE HIM, COLONEL. I'VE APPROACHED HIM REGARDING A JUNIOR PARTNERSHIP

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WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range News Oddities

By

HAROLD HELFER

Among some Indian tribes a man who takes a wife must agree to obey his mother-in-law.

Indians still occupy almost 5,000,000 acres of land in new Mexico.

Drought-stricken northern Arizona cattlemen have been complaining about the deer—they are drinking a fourth of the water being hauled in for cattle.

Comic Andy Devine, whose major asset as a western movie funnyman is his enormous avoirdupois—he weighs 325 pounds—is sort of dismayed about his role in his latest picture, "Slaughter Trail." It's not the horseback riding or the fighting involved, but, as Andy explains it, "This square dancing really thins me down."

Prairie dogs existed in such great numbers on the western plains a few years ago that one colony covered 25,000 square miles and had an estimated 400,000,000 inhabitants.

In pioneer days, people had to supply their own leather soles to the cobblers who traveled from door to door making and fixing shoes and boots.

The Aztec Indians practiced brain surgery far back in the 13th century.

Amarillo, Tex., Sheriff's officers said "No" to one request of a jail prisoner. He wanted his soup warmed twice.

Perhaps the greatest conglomeration of bats in the world are located at the Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. Millions of these winged mammals emerge from these caves every night at dusk.

House Peters, the old-time silent western movie star, who is at work on a new outdoor photoplay, will argue with any one who says the Westerns haven't changed since his day. Back in 1915, he starred in "The Great Divide," one of the first full-scale cowboy movies. Only two shots were fired in the whole picture. In the new film he is making with Gene Autry, there's shooting in nearly every scene.

The National Institute of Public Health is trying to find out why Navajo Indians, who belong to the peyote, or cactus button-chewing cult, go on narcotic jags in groups but seldom use dope when they're alone.

A mare weighing 1,100 pounds fell down a 32-foot well at Cadogan, Canada, landed in three feet of water and a nest of rattlers—and was rescued six hours later without being injured.

Dinero of Doom

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

"Law West of the Pecos"

IF A MAN hung around the Jersey Lily Saloon long enough, bartender Roy Bean was wont to boast, he would eventually rub shoulders with every Texan who amounted to anything in the Lone Star State, plus a goodly percentage of the outlaw element who sought temporary refuge in the Big Bend country.

Bean's saloon was strategically located on the ancient Spanish trail between modern El Paso and Del Rio. The town of Langtry—Bean had chosen the name to honor a leading actress of the day, with whom he was secretly infatuated—was the first settlement on the Rio Grande after crossing the Pecos, west-bound.

As a matter of fact, Roy Bean had appointed himself to a judgeship, and a weather-beaten sign over the wooden

The canyon was a deafening backdrop for roaring guns

It was in the bailiwick of Judge Roy Bean, the Law West of the Pecos, that the fighting Ranger faced his direst peril and tangled with the most murderous outlaws in his career!

awning of his deadfall proclaimed that he was the only "law West of the Pecos." His judicial decisions had already made him a legend on the frontier.

Bean was a saloonkeeper who enjoyed his own wares, sometimes to excess. His belly resembled a beer barrel, his eyes were perpetually laced with red as a result of his fondness for alcohol, and cowboys in the roundabout mesquitelands of Val Verde county had a standing joke to the effect that if "Judge" Roy Bean ever took the trouble to wring out his badger-colored whiskers he would have enough whisky to satisfy the trade for a week.

Roy Bean prided himself upon his ability to size up the gun-hung, close-lipped riders who patronized his saloon. The moment a customer shouldered through the batwings into his two-by-four barroom, Bean mentally catalogued him as being on one side of the law or the other, and invariably guessed right.

This morning, however, Bean was frankly puzzled. The tall, strikingly handsome young rider who had dropped in at the Jersey Lily an hour ago, ostensibly to wash the Texas alkali out of his gullet with a short beer, failed to fit into Bean's pattern of morality or criminality.

BY HIS DRESS, Bean judged the stranger to be a cowpuncher; that could account for the expensive Stetson, the saddle-shiny batwing chaps of chocolate-brown bullhide, the benchmade Justin boots with their star-roweled spurs. He wasn't a bronc "stomper" on any local ranch, for Bean knew the occupant of every bunkhouse in a thousand square miles of roundabout range. And he was too well-groomed and smooth-shaven to be a tumbleweed cowpoke, a grubline rider.

Pretending to be busy washing beer mugs, Roy Bean gave the cowboy his covert attention. Smuggler, maybe; the Rio Grande was within gunshot range of Langtry, and border hoppers, both Mexican and gringo, occasionally frequented the Jersey Lily. The matched Colt .45 Peacemakers holstered to the stranger's shell-studded gun harness could ticket him for a professional gunman, or yet again a sheriff or United States marshal, though the man's blue hickory shirt was innocent of any tin star.

Bean slapped his bar rag at an overly persistent fly. The cracking sound caused the three customers who were playing monte over at the corner table to look up, then continue with their game.

Bean knew the monte players. Doc Ingersoll was the one in the black Prince Albert, pleated linen shirt and string tie; he was a fly-by-night cardsharp who had offered Bean fifty percent of his winnings for the privilege of setting up for business last week at one of Bean's two poker tables. The takings hadn't amounted to much, despite Ingersoll's ability to read the backs of his cards; business was slack at this hot summer season.

The man with the unshaved stubble of red beard, like fine rusty wire jutting from his lean jaw, was Andy Grellan, who punched cows for the Flying T outfit over in the Comanche Hills. He drifted down to Langtry every two-three weeks to buck the tiger and get drunk at the Jersey Lily.

Bean didn't know the third customer's name, only that he was an itinerant hide buyer and horse trader; he had parked his wagon out front this morning, and would be drifting on his way shortly.

Doc Ingersoll had invited the good-looking stranger to join them in a round of stud, but the stranger had declined, speaking in a low Texas drawl. Other than ordering a beer, the stranger hadn't spoken a word since he had entered the barroom.

Roy Bean lighted up a cheroot and waddled his way down the backbar alley to where the broad-shouldered stranger was now standing, giving his rapt attention to a framed etching depicting the defense of the Alamo. Most of Bean's customers ignored the etching, prefering the gaudy chromo of actress Lily Langtry, the reigning beauty of the American stage, which occupied a place of honor

high on the wall behind the bar.

The stranger looked up at Bean's approach. His eyes, of a peculiar greenish-black hue, shone with interest as he nodded toward the etching and said, "This is a fine piece of artwork, Judge. Looks to be an original etching. Must have cost plenty."

Bean rolled his malodorous cigar between thick purple lips.

"Funny thing about that pitcher," he drawled. "I swapped a fifth of rye for it from the artist who drawed it. Claimed it was the only copy, that he destroyed

JIM HATFIELD

The Lone Wolf Lawman—who follows a trail of bogus money to a lair of range schemers

the plate or whatever it was he printed it off of, soon as he made this copy. Said it was worth a hundred bucks. Five's the best offer I've had yet, and it's been hangin' on that nail for over ten year now. I got swindled."

The stranger continued to admire the wealth of detail in the delicately-wrought, sepia-tinted picture. In one corner of the etching the artist had signed his initials, J.H., and the date.

"Did you get the name of the artist?" the cowboy wanted to know, his voice elaborately casual.

"Naw," Bean grunted. "He had TB, he said, and was tryin' to look up a relative over in this part of Texas, to take care of his kid after he cashed in. Eight years old, she was, skinny, but with big blue eyes as round as pesos. It was on account of her I took pity on the old man and swapped him a bottle for that itchin' pitcher."

DISAPPOINTMENT touched the stranger's eyes briefly. He had more interest in the Alamo etching than he let Bean know; one reason being the coincidence that the artist had the same monogram as his own, J.H. For this taciturn rider who had left his magnificent golden sorrel hitched to the Jersey Lily's rack out front was named Jim Hatfield—a name which carried a celebrity's distinction throughout Texas, since Hatfield was the Lone Star State's ace Ranger, more commonly known as the "Lone Wolf."

"Ever see or hear of this etcher again, Judge?" Hatfield inquired casually. "Did he ever locate his relative?"

Bean shook his head. "He just drifted off into the hills, him and the little girl. Probably coughed up his guts at some dry camp and the coyotes cleaned his bones. I've often wondered what happened to his little girl. Sad case."

A sudden commotion at the far end of the room prevented Roy Bean from asking the stranger's name and occupation. The sudden splintering crash of a chair being kicked to the floor caused the bartender and the Texas Ranger to wheel about.

Jim Hatfield saw the trouble at the instant it broke. It was an old, familiar pattern of Western violence—the shouted oath, the rasp of gunmetal leaving holsters, the click of hammers.

Roy Bean took in the picture a shaved instant before the Jersey Lily rocked to the explosion of gunfire: the cardshark Doc Ingersoll flicking his hide-out derringer from its spring clip under his right sleeve, Andy Grellan scrambling to get out of the way, the anonymous horse trader yanking his single-action Remington .44 out of leather with a trained gun-

hawk's swift, sure skill.

The little single-shot .41 in the gambler's fist spat flame, but the horse trader's big Remington had already exploded. Hatfield and Roy Bean knew the gambler's snap shot had gone wide of the target when they saw the force of the .44 ball knock Ingersoll over backwards, the horse trader standing there with his .44 tipped up toward the ceiling, blue-gray smoke wisping out of its bore.

"You heard him say that greenback was counterfeit, Andy!" the horse trader said in a snarling undertone. "Mebbe it is. But Ingersoll had to cold-deck me to see it."

Andy Grellan, from his position alongside the saloon wall, passed a shaking hand over his face and said meekly, "Ingersoll had his gun out first. It was self-defense, right enough."

Jim Hatfield remained standing at the end of the bar, showing only a surface interest in this killing. Roy Bean, however, seized a bungstarter from a shelf behind his bar and waddled over to the card table, yanking the Remington six-gun from the horse trader's fist just as the man was in the act of sliding it into leather.

"Reckon this is a situation for my court to hash out, gents!" the self-styled Judge said in a booming voice. "You can consider yoreself under arrest, hombre. What's your name and where are you from?"

The horse trader shrugged. "Name's Pete Kellogg. I'm from San Antonio." Intoxication thickened his voice.

Judge Bean waddled over to have a look at the gambler. Ingersoll was cold meat; Kellogg's slug had caught him square in the heart at point-blank range. Later, Bean found the .41 ball from Ingersoll's derringer in a ceiling beam.

"Now, prisoner at the bar," Bean said pompously, carrying out his courtroom role to the hilt, "what was the cause of this here go-around?"

Pete Kellogg braced himself with a swig from a whisky bottle on the card table before answering.

"I anted a fifty-dollar bill into the kitty. Ingersoll said it was bogus. I called him a liar. The tinhorn made his play with the sleeve gun. I cleaned his plow for him. You seen it, Judge."

FROM the far end of the saloon, Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield watched with a livening interest as he saw Roy Bean pick up the crisp, new-looking greenback which lay in a litter of poker chips and small change on the cigarette-burned baize.

"Looks genuine to me," grunted the judge. "Where'd you get this frogskin, Kellogg?"

The horse trader shrugged again. "Part payment for three saddle-broke broncs I sold a rancher over in the Comanche Hills day before yesterday. He give me that bill and the pile of cow hides I got out in my wagon."

"What was said rancher's name?" Roy Bean demanded.

"Didn't ask, Yore Honor."

There was a long pause, during which Bean collected the money from the card table and pocketed it.

"It's a plain case of self-defense," His Honor intoned finally. "Howsomever, you are guilty of disturbing the peace. There will also be expenses involved in burying the late Doc Ingersoll. It is the judgment of this court that you will have your six-gun confiscated and surrender this fifty-dollar-bill and the other legally tender dinero you had in the game, as a fine in settlement of said misdemeanor."

Kellogg took another swig from the bottle. "Suits me," he grunted, "except I would admire to have my six-gun back, if Yore Honor is so inclined. It—sniff—was my sainted mother's."

Roy Bean scowled, inspected the Remington carefully, and finally, with a magnanimous shrug, returned it to the horse trader, who holstered it with alacrity.

"Can't bear to keep a heirloom handed down by a saint," Roy Bean commented. "Court's dismissed. Now, who's buyin' drinks?"

Pete Kellogg was not too drunk to

realize that to loiter on the premises might mean getting stuck with a job of grave-digging. He clapped on his shapeless hat and lurched out of the saloon to the street.

"Judge," Andy Grellan spoke up petulantly, "a third of that there pot was mine. You got no legal right to fine that mangey horse trader with *my* honestly won money."

Roy Bean retorted archly, "That is a matter not within my jurisdiction to decide upon. You want to sue me?"

Jim Hatfield took advantage of the senseless argument impending between the judge and his customer, to slip out of the saloon.

The Lone Wolf hurried out to where a chastened Pete Kellogg was clambering aboard his disreputable wagon, the box of which was half filled with green steer hides, aswarm with buzzing flies.

"Kellogg," the Ranger called out, "I'd like to know the name of the rancher who slipped you that bogus bill. I'd especially like to know if it came from a Flying T outfit."

Kellogg's red-shot eyes regarded Hatfield belligerently.

"You heard me tell the Judge I disremember the man's name and brand," he snapped. "What business is it of yours, anyhow?"

With which Kellogg whipped his four-horse team into a run, heading eastward toward the Pecos crossing and San Antonio.

The Lone Wolf headed back toward Bean's saloon, grinning exultantly to himself.

He had taken care to notice the brand on the top-most hide of Kellogg's load. It was the Flying T.

"Trail's warming up," he muttered, shoving open the slatted halfdoors of the barroom. He found Bean serving the hot-tempered cowboy a foaming schooner of beer, apparently in an outside-the-court settlement of Grellan's claims for his share of the pot.

"Judge Bean," the Ranger said, "I want to talk to you—alone."

CHAPTER II

The Counterfeit Bill

SOMETHING in the grim fixture of Hatfield's jaw silenced the curt rejoinder which Judge Roy Bean had on the tip of his tongue. With a grunt, Bean turned away from Andy Grellan, who stood with one foot hooked on the brass rail while he salted his beer, and slouched along the bar alley to a door bearing the scribbled word PRIVATE.

Hatfield, following Bean into the room, found it to be a lean-to which the bartender used as his personal dwelling. An untidy bed was in one corner; a coffee pot and a skillet containing the shriveled remains of sowbelly strips stood on a rusty cookstove in the opposite corner. An overall stench of unwashed clothing, stale sweat, tobacco fumes and whisky pervaded the cubicle.

"If you aim to take exceptions to my methods of dispensing justice," snarled Bean, "let me tell you here and now I am the law West of the Pecos River. Any objections?"

Hatfield made certain the barroom door was closed. Then, reaching to a secret compartment of his chaps belt, he drew out a silver star encircled by a silver band. The law badge was inscribed TEXAS RANGER.

At sight of the emblem of Texas law, all vestiges of truculence faded from Roy Bean. He said hoarsely, "Ingersoll had that slug comin' to him, feller. It was either kill or be killed from that horse trader's point of view. I dispensed justice accordin' to my lights."

Hatfield returned the law badge to his belt and said impatiently, "I am not interested in your disposition of Kellogg's case, Judge. Have you ever heard of Captain William McDowell of Ranger headquarters in Austin?"

Beads of sweat rimed Bean's homely face. "Roarin' Bill? What Texan ain't

heard of McDowell?"

"Well," Hatfield said, "I am working for a case under McDowell's direct orders. More precisely, I have come to West Texas to investigate the activities of a smuggling ring engaged in shoving counterfeit money across this section of the Rio."

Roy Bean rubbed a flabby hand over his brindle beard.

"If you're hintin' I truck with counterfeiters, it's a lie."

Hatfield seated himself in a rickety chair.

"I am accusing you of nothing, Judge," he said placatingly. "The situation is this: for the past several years, the government has been concerned with a flood of bogus currency, believed to have been manufactured in Mexico and smuggled into Texas. The source of that counterfeiting leak has been traced to the area around Langtry here."

Roy Bean licked his lips. Some of his bluster returned as he realized that Hatfield did not intend to grill him.

"The strange thing about these counterfeit bills," Hatfield went on brusquely, "is that they are the product of an engraver so skillful that his currency fools the average banker and business man. The plates are perfect. But Treasury experts can tell the paper is counterfeit—it contains no silken threads."

As he spoke, Hatfield took from his pocket a jeweler's loupe—a magnifying glass in a hard rubber mount.

"I want to examine Kellogg's bill," Hatfield went on. "If it is counterfeit, then that gambler had an extraordinarily keen eye to detect it during the course of a monte game."

Bean reached in his pocket and fished out the crisp greenback. Hatfield placed the jeweler's loupe in his eye and inspected the bill carefully, giving special attention to the left cheek on the portrait of General Grant, which identified all American treasury notes of the fifty-dollar denomination.

He found what he was searching for. Included in the fine crosshatching was an almost microscopic legend: the word *Bogus*, followed by what appeared to be a capitol "T," the ends of the crossbar curved upward like wings. He had seen that T before.

JIM HATFIELD believed that letter "T" was intended to be a popular Western cattle brand, the Flying T. It was because of that hunch that he had pored for hours over the brand books of every State and Territory bordering on Old Mexico. He had found no less than eighteen Flying T brands, five of them in Texas; one of them in the Comanche Hills of northern Val Verde County. Captain Bill McDowell had had sufficient faith in Hatfield's hunch to dispatch his ace Ranger to Val Verde county to check on Flying T.

"This bill," Hatfield said, not telling Bean what he had found, "is counterfeit. It is my duty to confiscate it for evidence."

Roy Bean said reluctantly, "Sure—you keep it."

"Thank you," Hatfield said. "Now, can you sell me an envelope and two-cent stamp? And when does the next mail stage leave Langtry for eastern points?"

Roy Bean fished in a pile of debris on a nearby table and produced an envelope and stamp.

"San Antone stage is pulling out in fifteen minutes," Bean said, consulting a rusty alarm clock on a wall shelf. "And our Wells-Fargo station is just across the street."

Jim Hatfield stamped the envelope, produced a pencil from the band of his Stetson and scribbled an address:

Captain William McDowell,
Ranger Headquarters,
Austin, Texas.

Then, on the spurious $50 bill, he wrote, "Counterfeit—Hold As Evidence—Jas. Hatfield," followed by the date and the words "Langtry, Tex."

Placing the bill inside the envelope, Hatfield licked the flap and sealed it, Roy Bean watching him with absorbed fascination.

"The envelope and stamp are on the

The red-headed renegade advanced with a .45 in his fist

house," Bean said generously. "Anything to help the law."

Hatfield said, "One other thing, Judge. Who owns the Flying T ranch and where is it located?"

Bean's brows arched. He pitched his voice low as he answered, "That buckaroo out at the bar works for Flyin' T. It's a run-down cow spread about thirty miles north of here as the crow flies. You take the section line road out of Langtry and it'll lead you right to it."

"Who runs the Flying T?" Hatfield asked. "The cowboy out there?"

"Andy Grellan? Naw. Hombre name of Pecos Tim Trimble. Old-timer in this country. Fit with General Stuart—the Flyin' T started out as a soldier's donation claim. But why are you askin'?"

Hatfield ignored the question as he opened the door and headed out into the barroom. In so doing he startled Andy Grellan, who had left his place by the bar and was standing alongside the rear wall, apparently absorbed in studying the picture of the Defense of the Alamo which had aroused Hatfield's interest earlier.

Grellan looked quickly away, but not before the Ranger had spotted the open knothole alongside the copper engraving's frame. The thought struck Hatfield, He could have been spying on my talk with Bean. I've been careless.

Grellan, however, paid Hatfield no further attention as he swung around to buttonhole Roy Bean upon his emergence from the back room.

"Judge, you ain't gettin' away with this, bribin' me with no stale beer. They was three hundred-odd dollars in that monte pot. A third of that dinero is mine. I work hard for my wages, damn it."

Hatfield left the Jersey Lily with Grellan and Bean's argument ringing in his ears. The Ranger had no further interest in the Judge's unkempt saloon; he was anxious to get his letter on its way to Captain McDowell without delay.

Langtry was a town in name only, consisting only of a half-dozen adobe shacks in addition to Bean's clapboard saloon. Directly across the town's single street was the Wells-Fargo relay station, the only one between Marfa and Del Rio.

THE WEEKLY CONCORD for San Antonio was standing before the sheet-iron-roofed stage stand now, the driver and shotgun messenger already in the box, hostlers busy hitching a fresh six-horse span into the traces.

Hatfield hurried up and called to the driver, "Mail sacks closed yet?"

The driver, busy sorting his ribbons, jerked his head toward the office. "Postmaster's inside. You'll make it."

Ducking around the curtained rear of the stage, which he noted in passing was empty of passengers on this run, Hatfield hurried into the Wells-Fargo office, which served Langtry as its U. S. post office in addition.

The bald-headed stage tender was in the act of padlocking his first-class mail pouch. Without having to flash his Ranger's badge —a thing which Hatfield was reluctant to do, since he usually worked incognito— the Ranger was able to see his letter containing the counterfeit bill safely deposited in the out-going mail sack.

Leaving Wells-Fargo, Hatfield walked back across the dusty road to Roy Bean's hitchrack. He was tightening the cinch on Goldy, his leggy sorrel stallion, when his attention was drawn to the brand on the rump of a shad-bellied bay gelding hitched next to his. It was the Flying T.

"Andy Grellan's bronc," Hatfield thought, glancing toward the unpainted Jersey Lily. From the barroom came the sound of loud and angry voices; the Judge, apparently, was reluctant to give up any more of the "fine" money he had taken from the gambling table.

In saddle, Hatfield swung Goldy around just as the thoroughbraced stagecoach lurched into motion. The driver's whip popped, wheels rumbled on the hard gumbo ruts, and the San Antonio mail was on its way for another week.

A section line road made its arrow-straight track into the sage flats north of Langtry, toward the far-off purple slopes of the Comanche Hills. Somewhere in those sun-baked hills was Hatfield's next objective—Pecos Tim Trimble's Flying T ranch.

Hitting the section line road, Hatfield spurred Goldy into a reaching canter.

CHAPTER III

Wells-Fargo Ambush

NEARLY three miles out of Langtry, Jim Hatfield pulled off the road into a bosque of smoke trees. He was reluctant to have a Flying T rider on his back trail, which would be the case if Andy Grellan intended to return home before dark.

Hatfield's very presence in this country west of the Pecos River was an outgrowth of the discovery, made by a counterfeit expert in Washington D. C., that all ten, twenty and fifty-dollar counterfeits picked up in Texas of recent years carried the tiny inscription "Bogus" and the Flying T symbol, cunningly inserted by the engraver in letters too small to be read by the naked eye.

Treasury experts in the nation's capitol had offered the opinion that the incription was placed there as a taunt by the master counterfeiter, and that the strangely-shaped letter "T" was his personal initial.

But Jim Hatfield, discussing the situation with Captain McDowell in Austin recently, had come up with his hunch that the Flying T insignia *might* represent a cattle-ranch brand. And of all the Flying Ts he had been able to locate in brand registry books, the Flying T ranch here in Val Verde County seemed to be the one most likely to be involved in any smuggling of bogus money across the Rio Grande, being nearest the border.

The mere fact that Kellogg had received one of the bogus-branded bills from Pecos Tim Trimble of a Flying T spread was not enough evidence to arrest Trimble on, but in Hatfield's mind the coincidence was too marked to overlook. Hatfield believed that at last, he might have stumbled across a valid clue connected with what Ranger slang referred to as the "Dinero of Doom" case.

"Dinero of Doom" was an alliterative nickname given to the flood of counterfeit money by the border underworld.

Authorities in Washington was well as Austin doubted that the outlaw element who trafficked in the bogus money had any knowledge of the "Flying T" inscription which the bills carried; the Treasury Department detective who had first discovered it had done so only with the help of a microscope.

But a sizeable list of men had suffered ill fortune in connection with the counterfeit traffic. A number of hapless individuals, attempting to fence the bills at a discount to dishonest pawnbrokers in big cities, had wound up in Federal penitentiaries.

In many cases, especially in Texas itself, sudden death had resulted from connection with the counterfeit traffic. Out of these events had come the "Dinero of Doom" nickname; and the Texas Rangers had used the nickname to head their own dossier on the case.

When an hour's wait had failed to reveal any sign of Andy Grellan, Hatfield resaddled and emerged from the smoke-tree motte for a look at his back trail.

He had an unbroken view all the way to Langtry's cluster of sun-punished shacks. There was no trace of a following rider on the Flying T road. But a moment's scrutiny of the Jersey Lily's hitch rack, through field glasses, told Hatfield that Andy Grellan's horse was no longer tied there.

With a thirty-mile jaunt ahead of him, Hatfield decided to resume his ride. He was another mile on his way when his ears caught a remote crackle of gunshots, riding the wind from the east.

Hatfield reined up, keening the afternoon's heat. He heard no further shooting; but then his eagle-keen vision detected a smudge of dust in the distance, and a rapidly-moving object too far off to identify with the naked eye.

From a saddle pouch Hatfield withdrew his pair of Army field glasses. Focussing the powerful lenses quickly, the Ranger trained them on the moving object.

A gasp of astonishment sucked across Hatfield's teeth as his binoculars identified the object as a yellow-wheeled, red-bodied stage coach.

The Concord was rocketing across the open sage flats, not following any defined road. And then Hatfield noted something else; the team was stampeding with no hand at the reins. He could not be sure, but he believed he had spotted the jehu's crumpled body jammed against the footboard.

HATFIELD swung his glasses leftward, toward the south. The road to San Antonio appeared briefly at the mouth of a long arroyo some five miles out of Langtry town.

'That could be the San Antone stage I saw pull out this morning—"

Hatfield quickly picked up the runaway stage again. The stampeding team was slowing down as the ground pitched upward at an increasing grade.

Then something spooked the horses, causing them to swing suddenly to a right angle. As Hatfield watched helplessly, he saw the Concord capsize, dragging the team to a halt.

Sunlight flashed off the varnished spokes of the spinning wheels. He saw dust boil up as the six-horse team threshed in the harness, finally breaking free of the capsized vehicle to go galloping off out of sight over a further ridge.

Disaster had overtaken the stage; the remembered roar of gunnery seemed to indicate that the driver had been ambushed. Indians might have jumped the San Antonio coach, down in the arroyo where the road vanished; there were numerous bands of reservation-jumping Comanches known to be on the warpath in this section of West Texas this summer.

Hatfield thrust his glasses back into their case. His decision to pay a visit to Pecos Tim Trimble's ranch over in the Comanche Hills was shelved for the time being; there might be injured passengers in that wrecked stage, in need of help.

Touching rowels to Goldy's flanks, Hatfield left the road he was following and

cut off across the cactus-dotted range in a beeline for the wrecked coach. He judged the wreck to be roughly five miles east of the Langtry road, but distances were deceptive in this country and he had traveled closer to eight miles before he put Goldy up the blue-bonnet carpeted flank of the hill where the wreck lay.

He saw no sign of life in the smashed Concord as he rode up. Fifty yards away, Hatfield paused to check the loads on the .30-30 Winchester carbine he carried under his saddle fender. Then he had a careful look at the country between the wrecked Concord and the direction it had traveled.

There was no sign of movement on the lowering prairie to southward. The ground was open; no ambusher could surprise him in his inspection of the wreckage.

Goldy trumpeted nervously as Hatfield rode in close, the sorrel's sensitive nostrils smelling blood.

Several yards from the overturned Concord, Hatfield saw a dead man sprawled against an ocotillo bush. It was the raw-boned oldster who had been seated on the box of the outgoing San Antonio stage at Langtry this morning. The jehu's skull had been pierced from behind by a rifle slug. A broken bit of leather ribbon was still clutched in one stiffening hand.

Hatfield dismounted and had his look at the Concord. There were no passengers, dead or alive, inside.

That this was no routine accident or Indian attack was evidenced by the fact that the Wells-Fargo strongbox was missing from the boot. So, in addition, were the two mail pouches which Hatfield had seen the Langtry postmaster toss up to the shotgun messenger. The latter's corpse was nowhere to be seen.

Back in saddle, Hatfield headed south, following the zig-zag wagon tracks of the stampeding coach. Twenty minutes' riding brought him to the eastern entrance of the arroyo which the San Antonio road followed on its way to the Pecos ford. In the near distance to eastward, Hatfield could see the green cottonwoods and willow brake marking the banks of that serpentine, alkali-laden river, marking the outpost of Texas law.

The Ranger put Goldy down into the arroyo, rifle ready in his hand despite the fact that the ambusher had had nearly two hours to make his getaway.

JUST INSIDE the arroyo, Hatfield found the grim sequal to the driver's murder.

The shotgun guard lay beside the road, where he had fallen off the coach, a bullet in the temple. The man was still clutching his unfired double-barreled Greener.

A few feet away lay the iron-bound express box, its padlock broken by a bullet. The box was empty.

There was a path through the ankle-deep dust where two objects had been dragged off into the brush below the arroyo rim. Following those tracks, Hatfield was not surprised to identify their source: two U.S. mail pouches, slashed open with a knife, the contents strewn about in the weeds.

The stage robber had ignored the ordinary first-class mail, concentrating on registered envelopes which might contain money or other valuables.

And then, pawing around through the litter of envelopes, Hatfield spied his own letter to Captain McDowell, and he expelled his breath in a long sigh of relief. At least the bandit had overlooked—

But had he? Snatching the letter up, its stamp canceled with the Langtry post-office stamp, he saw that the envelope he had borrowed from Roy Bean had been neatly slit open. The spurious fifty-dollar bill it had contained was missing.

Hatfield pocketed the envelope and stood up, his face grim and thoughtful. Under different circumstances he would have gathered up the scattered mail and returned it to Langtry, along with the body of the slain shotgun guard.

This crime should be reported at once to the nearest sheriff, but Val Verde county was as big as some New England States, and the county seat was at Del Rio, a day's ride along the Rio Grande.

"The ambusher had to leave some sign behind," muttered the Lone Wolf Ranger. "The wind would erase his tracks before I could bring the law up from Del Rio to investigate this—"

Hatfield poked around behind the mesquite trees until he located where the ambusher's horse had been tied. Clearly visible in the hoof-churned dirt were several sets of boot prints—high heeled cowpuncher boots with box toes.

Hatfield inspected the prints at great length, memorizing their conformation. Only one tiny deviation set them apart from any other pair of boots—the right heel had been repaired with a crescent-shaped bit of metal.

The horse's left forehoof carried a shoe with new calks, the other three being worn down to nubs. The stagecoach robber was forking a bronc with three worn shoes, one new shoe . . .

Whistling for Goldy, Hatfield mounted and set off along the San Antonio road, following the clearly-defined trail which the escaping ambusher had left behind him.

Half a mile away from the scene of the robbery, just as Hatfield was beginning to think the bandit had planned to ford the Pecos, the trail cut sharply to the northward and headed along the sage flats toward the Comanche Hills.

A low-lying hogback to westward had shielded the outlaw's getaway from Hatfield's sight as the Ranger had been approaching the wrecked stage.

An hour later, still following a trail which was bee-lining northward, Hatfield saw the stage team grazing in a patch of grama grass. Eventually, he knew, the Morgans would return to their Langtry corral in search of water; then the Wells-Fargo agent there would organize a posse to track down the missing stage.

Darkness overtook Hatfield at the outskirts of the Comanche Hills, and he decided to make a dry camp, lest he miss a turn of the stage bandit's getaway trail in the darkness. Was it significant that the outlaw appeared to be heading toward the ranch where Andy Grellan worked?

CHAPTER IV

Girl of the Flying T

FICKLE gods who control the destinies of the owlhoot breed worked, during that night, to thwart Jim Hatfield's manhunt. Around midnight, a brisk wind off the Pecos bottoms turned to near gale proportions; the Ranger was forced to use his saddle blanket for a tent to shield his lungs from flying dust. The gale tapered off after two hours' duration.

Dawn's light told Hatfield that his manhunt trail had come to an end; all trace of the hoofprints he had followed so easily the afternoon before had been expunged from the earth's surface by a sandstorm which had ribbed the bare ground with miniature dunes of fantastic herringbone pattern.

Hatfield shrugged off his bitter disappointment. After all, the stagecoach tragedy was a side-issue to the mission that had brought him to the Comanche Hills. Last night, tracking down the wanton killer, perhaps recovering the bandit's loot, had seemed a highly probable thing. Now the outlaw was lost in the limitless expanse that comprised the West Texas frontier.

He breakfasted on the last of the provisions in his saddle-bags and, hitting the trail again, decided to angle northwestward until he picked up the Langtry section line road again. Judge Roy Bean had said that road would lead him directly to Pecos Pete Trimble's Flying T spread.

The sun was two hours high when Hatfield spotted a group of raw-boned longhorned cattle browsing in scant grass under a dead liveoak. He veered over to inspect the cattle and was not surprised to note that they wore the Flying T brands.

"Could be I'm on Trimble's range now," Hatfield mused. "They don't seem to be using drift fences in this country."

If all of Trimble's beef critters were as

gaunted down as these specimens, Hatfield could see why the Texan had been reduced to butchering his stock for what their hides and tallow would bring—the ultimate in degradation for a cowman. Yet Trimble had swapped a considerable number of hides for the saddle horses he had obtained from Pete Kellogg, who even now was headed for the tannery with his load.

As far as Hatfield's eye could reach, he saw no clump of greenery which would indicate a water hole. Drought had reduced the rangeland grasses to an all-over tawny brown, making survival tough for any rancher with stock to run on this land. A webwork of stock trails covered the round-about prairie, and those trails seemed to lead from a common center, spider web fashion. That, to Hatfield's trained eye, was proof that a waterhole of some sort would be found at the focal point of those trails.

He picked one of the trails up and followed it northwestward. In the distance the Comanche Hills lifted to rough rock formations where the erosion of the centuries had stripped the earth to its bedrock bones.

Topping an intermediate rise, the Ranger caught sight of a ranch headquarters in the flats below—ramshackle barns and corrals, a two-story box-shaped ranch house in need of paint, a windmill whose wooden vanes were motionless in the heated air. The buildings were a good mile off, yet their details were astonishingly vivid in the clear atmosphere.

Sunlight glinted on muddy water pooled around the rusty sheet iron tanks at the foot of the windmill tower. Goldy blew his lips and strained at the reins, eager to get going as he scented his first water since leaving Langtry.

In the act of spurring forward, Hatfield caught sight of two riders sitting their saddles in the sparse shade of a lone live oak, fifty yards below the crest of the hogbank. They were a man and a girl, both young; they were giving Hatfield their sullen attention.

The Ranger swung his sorrel in their direction. He saw them glance at each other, but they made no sign of greeting as he sent Goldy trotting over toward the oak.

THE man, Hatfield saw, was a stripling sprouting his first whiskers, around eighteen or nineteen; his clothes were on the shabby side, linsey-woolsey shirt and patched levis tucked into mail-order boots. The sombrero he wore was made of maguey fiber and was a type commonly worn by the poorer class of Mexicans along the border. But this rider was no Mexican; his hair was like bleached straw and the bony structure of his face was square and blocky, showing a Nordic blood strain. He wore no guns.

The girl intrigued Hatfield as he reined up a short distance away. There was something in her blue eyes, a haunted look which bespoke some inner tension. Either she had been interrupted in the act of quarreling with this young man, or—the thought struck Hatfield strongly—perhaps she was not mentally all there.

She was nearing twenty, but still wore her taffy-colored hair in a little girl's pigtail braids over either shoulder. Her immature bosom and the hollowness of her cheeks told the Ranger that she was ill-fed, perhaps ill-treated. She wore a man's shirt, split riding skirt of doeskin, and riding boots which were two sizes too large for her.

"Good day," Hatfield said, smiling pleasantly, as he doffed his John B. "Mind tellin' me the brand of the ranch yonder?"

The young couple exchanged glances again. Hatfield got the uncomfortable impression that they resented his presence here; he wondered if he had interrupted a lover's tryst of some kind.

"The Flying T," grunted the youth, after a weighty pause.

Hatfield piled hands on saddle horn, eying the run-down ranch in the distance with fresh interest. He was surprised to find Pecos Pete Trimble's spread this far off the Langtry road. Perhaps Judge Roy Bean had intentionally misdirected him to the Flying T yesterday; Trimble's

ranch, lost in this little pocket in the Comanche Hills, was a good fifteen miles east of the section line road, he judged.

"Any idea if the ramrod is hiring any lass' ropes?" Hatfield went on.

The girl cleared her throat. Her voice had a sullen quality.

"Mr. Trimble is not hiring any men. You are wasting your time on Flying T if you are hunting for work, stranger."

The blond-headed young puncher picked up his reins and said gruffly to the girl, "I better be slopin', Jackie. You don't want to over-stay your time or—you know what will happen."

With a final surly scowl for Hatfield, the rider gigged his strawberry roan into a canter and headed off along the crest of the ridge, not once looking back.

The girl's mouth compressed grimly as she saw Hatfield ride up to halt alongside her stirrup.

"Jackie," Hatfield said slowly. "Short for Jacqueline?"

The girl hesitated, pretending to look away, but giving Hatfield her roused attention.

"You ask personal questions, stranger."

"Are you Mr. Trimble's daughter."

"My name is Jackie Harrowell."

"Do you live at Flying T?"

Jackie Harrowell backed her horse, a crowbait apaloosa, back into the oak's shade as Goldy attempted to nuzzle her mount.

"You are too inquisitive, stranger. Let me tell you this: strangers are not welcome on Mr. Trimble's range."

Hatfield grinned, taking no offense. "I didn't cross any fences getting here," he reminded her. "I saw no signs warning against trespassers. Why should Mr. Trimble be so cagey? Afraid of rustlers?"

The girl's lip curled. "Rustlers wouldn't get rich if they picked up this ranch lock stock and barrel, stranger." Her voice softened, took on an almost pleading quality. "Do not stay on this range. The Flying T is a place of evil. If—if I could, I would not set foot on this range again as long as I lived."

Hatfield tried a new tack. "The young man who just rode off—is he a Trimble?"

"Bob Orlee? He just works for Pete Trimble. Or slaves for him. Do not insult him by calling him a Trimble."

CURIOSITY was growing stronger in the Lone Wolf Ranger. Some deep-rooted hate for Trimble and the Flying T ranch had warped this girl's personality.

"You think a lot of Bob Orlee," Hatfield suggested, reaching in his shirt pocket for Durham sack and thin papers.

"I love him!" Jackie Harrowell said with a violence which brought a rush of color to her cheeks. "If it weren't for me, Bob could get away from this—this awful place."

As she flung the almost hysterical torrent of words at Jim Hatfield, the girl spun her horse about and, spurring the apaloosa savagely, galloped off in the direction of the ranch.

The Ranger waited until the girl was out of sight beyond a distant barn. Then he sent Goldy fox-trotting into the sage-gray basin. Once he hipped around in saddle to look behind him; he saw Bob Orlee sitting his horse against the skyline, staring after him.

Giving Goldy his head, Hatfield arrived at the brimming water troughs under the windmill derrick. Beyond the windmill was an adobe bunkhouse, sparsely shaded by four sick-looking box elder trees.

He saw Jacqueline Harrowell emerge from a barn and head across the yard. She disappeared inside the Flying T house.

Somewhere beyond the bunkshack a maul was making metallic music on an anvil. After Goldy had quenched his thirst, Jim Hatfield headed around the end of the bunkhouse and came in sight of a blacksmith shop. Two men were engaged in the task of shoeing three horses in front of the shop.

"The broncs Trimble bought this week from Pete Kellogg," Hatfield surmised, riding on up.

A red-headed cowhand wearing a bull-hide apron was busy rasping the left fore hoof of a steeldust gelding with a farrier's iron. As Hatfield dismounted, the cow-

hand looked up and gave a grunt of recognition. This man was Andy Grellan, the cowhand Hatfield had seen playing monte in Judge Roy Bean's saloon over in Langtry yesterday.

"Howdy, Grellan!" Hatfield grinned. "Did the Judge rebate you your share of Kellogg's fine?"

Grellan released the steeldust's foreleg and wiped his slack-lipped mouth with the back of his hand.

"All I got out of that sidewinder was a short beer," Grellan snorted. "Roy Bean's goin' to over-step hisself, playactin' like a judge on the bench. He robbed me—that's what he did!"

A man came out of the smithy to join them, an oldster wearing a gray Confederate army shirt, moleskin pants and disreputable boots. He had a brush of tobacco-rusty whiskers framing a lantern jaw and his bald head gleamed like a cue ball in the hot sunlight. The man was crowding seventy, Hatfield judged.

"You two are acquainted?" the oldster demanded harshly, glancing at Andy Grellan.

"We met over at Langtry yesterday," Hatfield supplied, when no answer seemed forthcoming from Andy Grellan. "Are you Pecos Pete Trimble, by any chance?"

The old man tossed aside the horse shoe he had been shaping. His shaggy brows drew closer in a truculent scowl as he put the full strike of his gaze on Jim Hatfield.

"That's right. And what brings you out to this uncurried neck of Hell?"

HATFIELD grinned disarmingly. He had taken an instant aversion to the owner of the Flying T, reading the innate cruelty in the man's narrowed eyes and steel-trap mouth. It was easy to see why Jackie Harrowell could hate this man.

"Judge Bean over at Langtry said a man might rent his rope here on Flying T," the Ranger said.

Trimble grunted. "Bean is a fool. Where are you from and what's your handle?"

"Jed Henderson. Brazos country."

"On the dodge?" Trimble asked the question in a laconic voice which gave no indication as to what sort of answer would be most acceptable to him.

"No," Hatfield grinned. "Just fiddle-footed. Always had a hankering to see what Texas was like, this side of the Pecos."

Trimble appeared to be sorting this information over in his mind, his eyes continuing to search Hatfield from head to foot.

"I'm sendin' a crew over to Fort Stockton tomorrow," Trimble said finally, "to drive back a jag of feeders and some rejected horses from the cavalry remount officer over there. I'll need an extra drover. Temporary, you understand."

Hatfield nodded. A trail drive excursion away from Flying T was not exactly in his plans, but it would give him a chance to look Trimble's spread over, hunt for clues which might point to Flying T being a link in the counterfeit smuggling chain.

"Sounds good to me, Trimble. What wages?"

"Fifty a month and found."

Hatfield did not show his surprise at this figure. Thirty dollars was the accepted rate of pay for ordinary cowhands in this section of Texas, even at round-up time. Every evidence pointed to Pecos Pete Trimble being hard up; yet he was offering a fantastically high wage.

Maybe his money comes cheap, Hatfield thought. Aloud, he said, "Suits me fine, boss. You've hired yourself a hand."

The old man spat a gobbet of tobacco into the dust and turned to Andy Grellan. "Show him a spare bunk, Andy. Henderson, I won't work you today, but be ready to turn out early tomorrow."

Trimble turned back to his anvil. Andy Grellan shucked off his blacksmith's leather apron, beckoned for Hatfield to follow him, and headed off in the direction of the bunkhouse.

As Hatfield was picking up Goldy's reins to follow Grellan, he heard the cowpuncher's right boot heel strike a chunk of rock on the ground, giving off a peculiar metallic sound, as if the heel was soled with an iron plate.

Heading after his guide, Jim Hatfield glanced down at the boot prints Andy Grellan was leaving in the dust. They matched identically those of the killer who had robbed the San Antonio stage yesterday afternoon—the box-cut toes, the crescent-shaped plate on the right heel.

CHAPTER V

The Mysterious Window

TO REACH the Flying T bunkshack, Andy Grellan took a short-cut past the main ranch house.

Sizing up Trimble's home, Jim Hatfield was struck with the same eerie sensation he had experienced as a kid while exploring a "haunted house" where a pioneer settler had been massacred by Kiowa Indians. The Flying T house gave off an indefinable aura of evil, of mystery; it could be the abode of spooks.

The cobwebbed, unwashed windows seemed to be concealing secrets; they reflected Hatfield's passage dully, reminding him of the half-open eyes of a corpse. The porch corner was sagging, its supporting piller long since rotted away and unrepaired. The only touch of color about the place was a single potted geranium sitting on the sill of the kitchen window. Seeing that flower, Hatfield thought, "That would be Jackie Harrowell's feminine touch, likely."

The girl was inside the house. Following Grellan across the corner of the yard, its lawn long since overtaken by weeds which the drought had killed two seasons ago, Hatfield found himself thinking about Jackie's melancholy spirit, her strange love affair with the young buckaroo named Bob Orlee.

The girl had hinted that she was virtually a prisoner on this ranch; she had tried to warn him to avoid the place. If she was in love with Orlee, what held the young couple here?

Something impelled Hatfield to turn and glance back at the house. In so doing his eye caught the small blur of movement at the window of the attic gable; he had the impression that a face had been peering out at him, hastily withdrawn to avoid discovery.

Gunny sack curtains were still settling back into place. And another thing struck Hatfield as odd: the attic window was heavily barred with strap-iron latticework, like a jail cell window.

Grellan had reached the adobe bunkhouse now.

"You'll find plenty of empty stalls in the barn yonder for your sorrel," Grellan said. "I'll show you where to spread your soogans."

Hatfield untied his slicker-bound bedroll from behind Goldy's cantle and, ground-tying the sorrel, followed Grellan into the bunkhouse.

Double-deck bunks tiered two sides of the one-room structure. Greasy playing cards, a litter of broken poker chips, a rusty lantern with a soot-fouled chimney, and a disorderly stack of *Old Cattlemen's Almanacs* were piled on a ricketty-legged deal table in the center of the room. There was a heating stove made from an old iron barrel at the far end of the bunkhouse. Only four of the twelve bunks were equipped with blankets.

"How many cattle does your boss run, Andy?" Hatfield asked, after Grellan had shown him the bunk which would be his.

"Hard tellin', the way they been dyin' off lately."

Hatfield went on, "Only four in the crew?"

"Five, now that you've signed on for the jaunt to Fort Stockton tomorrow."

Hatfield tried to read whatever lay behind Grellan's hooded, inky glance. He was convinced that this man was a killer, a stage robber. If Grellan had been eavesdropping on Hatfield's talk with Judge Roy Bean yesterday, then perhaps Grellan's motive for trailing the stage and murdering its crew was to intercept Hatfield's message to Ranger headquarters.

If so, then Grellan knew Hatfield's true identity, and might guess his mission here

on Flying T. The red-head was definitely not a man on whom to turn one's back.

"I ran into Bob Orlee and the girl, riding in," Hatfield said conversationally. "She the boss' daughter?"

FOR the first time, Grellan's impassive mask of a face showed concern.

"Let me give you a tip, my friend," Grellan said, pausing in the doorway. "Don't ask so damned many questions."

The sagging door of the bunkhouse slammed on Grellan's departure.

Hatfield shrugged, walked over to the card table and sat down on an empty packing box which served as a chair. He rolled and lit a smoke, and killed half an hour playing solitaire before going outside to take care of Goldy.

One puzzle was uppermost in his mind: if Grellan was the stage bandit he had been trailing yesterday—of which Hatfield had no doubt—then had Grellan been working on his own, or had he reported the ambush to Pecos Pete Trimble?

This temporary job on Flying T might easily turn out to be a murder trap, Hatfield realized. He made a mental resolution to have another talk with the girl, Jacqueline, and further sound her out regarding the "evil" reputation she had given the Flying T.

Out at the horse barn, Hatfield curried down Goldy and turned the sorrel out in the corral. Several other horses were rolling in the dust there, one of which the Ranger recognized as the girl's apaloosa.

Another was the shad-belly bay gelding which Andy Grellan had had tied in front of the Jersey Lily Saloon over in Langtry yesterday. Hatfield sauntered over to the bay and, after making sure the corral was not visible from the blacksmith shop where Grellan and his boss were working, he had a look at the pony's hoofs.

As he had anticipated, Grellan's horse had a new shoe on the left front foot, and the calks of the other three shoes were worn down to nubs. He had all the evidence he needed now to place Andy Grellan under arrest for a double murder and robbing the United States mails. But that arrest would have to wait.

Leaving the corral, Hatfield sauntered over to the house and knocked on the kitchen door after finding it bolted from the inside.

He could hear someone moving around inside the kitchen, but he got no answer to his repeated rappings. If Jacqueline Harrowell was the person inside, she was afraid to answer the door. Hatfield wondered, was it the girl who had been peering through the bars of the mysterious attic window?

Hatfield returned to the bunkhouse and, locating a tin washtub and a bar of lye soap, killed time by catching up on his laundry work.

At noon, three riders appeared at the bunkhouse to wash up for dinner. One of them was Bob Orlee; the others introduced themselves to him as Pablo Baro, a Mexican with a strain of Indian blood evident in his high cheek bones and jet-black hair, the other a sloppily-dressed American, Sam McClinton.

All three appeared surprised at finding a new cowhand on their boss' payroll, Orlee in particular. Jackie Harrowell's friend avoided Hatfield's glance.

The jangle of a hammer on an old wagon tire called the Flying T crew to the main house for dinner. Andy Grellan joined Hatfield and the others at a scantily-set table inside the Flying T ranch house; during the entire meal, however, Hatfield got no glimpse of Pecos Pete Trimble.

It was a gloomy meal. These Flying T punchers did not engage in the usual horse play and bantering camaraderie of the typical Texas ranch crew; they wolfed down their food in sullen silence. Who had baked the potatoes, fried the chicken or brewed the coffee, Hatfield did not know, for no cook emerged from the kitchen. He saw no further sign of the girl.

AFTER their meal, Hatfield made it a point to follow Bob Orlee out to the remuda corral, where the young puncher had a saddle-soaping job to attend to.

Without preliminary verbal sparring, Hatfield said bluntly, "Do you intend to marry Jacqueline, Bob?"

Orlee paused in his work, his lips whitening under pressure.

"Any business of yours, stranger?"

"She's in love with you. If she is so unhappy here on Flying T, what's to prevent you two going away?"

Orlee lifted his saddle to a corral rail, swatting his hands together, and regarded Hatfield belligerently.

"Jackie talks too much. Don't make the same mistake, stranger."

Hatfield reached out to seize Orlee's arm. "Wait a minute. Something fishy is going on here and you know what it is. Tell me; is your sweetheart being held here against her will? Is she a prisoner in that attic dormer?"

The Ranger's words hit home, blind shot in the dark though they were. The anger in Orlee's eyes faded, giving way to unmasked fear.

"Maybe you mean well, stranger," Orlee whispered. "But stop followin' me around. You've had your belly filled—why don't you light a shuck?"

Hatfield released Orlee's arm. "Trimble hired me to make this trail drive back from Fort Stockton ."

"What trail drive?"

For a long moment, Hatfield peered into Orlee's eyes. It was obvious that this puncher knew nothing of Trimble's plan to pick up a herd of horses and cattle from the army outpost.

"If Trimble told you that's why he hired you," Orlee went on, "he was lyin' in his teeth. He must be trying to stall you. Stranger, I think you're marked for Boot Hill. Take my advice and pull out of here while you can."

Orlee hurried off toward the bunkhouse, Hatfield making no attempt to join the rest of the crew.

After the noon break, the Flying T punchers saddled up and rode off toward the northern badlands, leaving Andy Grellan and the boss to finish their job of shoeing horses.

A growing impatience needled Hatfield as he loafed away the afternoon. Supper was a repetition of the noon meal; they were summoned to the house to find a table set for them, with no cook in evidence; not a dozen words were exchanged by the men, nor did Pecos Pete Trimble join them at the table.

After darkness had fallen, Hatfield saw Orlee, Baro and McClinton start a card game. They did not invite Hatfield to join them. After watching the game for a few minutes, Hatfield got up off his bunk, yawned, and said, "Reckon I'll go bed down my bronc for the night. Boss says we're making an early start for the Fort in the morning."

The Flying T punchers exchanged glances, but said nothing.

Leaving the bunkhouse, Hatfield headed out to the barn. He took pains to observe that no light showed behind the barred window of the attic dormer. One light glowed behind drawn curtains on the lower floor of the ranch house.

Reaching the barn, Jim Hatfield went inside to the stall which had been assigned to Goldy's use. He was feeling around in the darkness for a lantern he remembered having seen, when he heard the sliding door of the barn trundle open and someone entered the building.

Some instinct caused Hatfield to freeze motionless, standing beside Goldy inside the stall. He heard feet shuffling through reasty straw; then a match burst aflame, and its yellow glare revealed an apparition straight out of Dante.

An incredibly thin and stoop-shouldered man with a goat's beard depending from his angular jaw was jacking up the chimney of the stable lantern and touching the match to the wick. The man's long, flexible fingers, Hatfield noted, were stained with some green substance, as if he had been working with a batch of dye.

TOTING the lantern, the old man headed past Hatfield's position and entered the next stall. He hung the lantern on a peg, pulled a saddle off a rack, and proceeded to cinch it aboard Jacqueline Harrowell's apaloosa.

The lamplight put a halo on the old man's thinning brown hair. The way the light struck his face showed an uncanny resemblance to the mysterious girl who had tried to warn Hatfield away from Flying T this morning.

"Howdy," Jim Hatfield spoke without warning from the darkness. "You are Jacqueline's father, aren't you?"

The old man whirled, his jaw sagging to expose toothless gums. There was stark terror limned on the derelict's pallid face as he saw Jim Hatfield step into the lantern's shine.

"Did—Jackie tell you that?" the old man cawed.

"The resemblance is obvious," Hatfield answered.

The old man slipped a bridle over the apaloosa's head and buckled it tight.

"I am Jebediah Harrowell," he said, in a tone such as a criminal might have used in pleading guilty to murder. "Will you please excuse me if I appear to be in a hurry? I am allowed only forty minutes for my nightly constitutional to Thimble Rock and return."

The old man led the apaloosa out of the stall and left the barn. A deep pity stirred Hatfield. Was Jebediah Harrowell a mental case, some demented relation of Trimble's who was kept out of sight all day, then allowed less than an hour for horseback riding in the fresh air after dark? Old Harrowell might well have been the occupant of the attic rom with the barred window. . . .

Harrowell had mentioned "Thimble Rock" as his destination. The name reminded Hatfield of a landmark he had seen riding in this morning, a chimney of weathered tufa, pocked with holes which made it resemble a thimble.

Acting on sudden impulse, Hatfield saddled up Goldy. He would overtake the old man and attempt to worm some information from him regarding his and Jacqueline's status on this ranch.

As he was backing Goldy out of the stall, Hatfield heard a thud of approaching footsteps from the direction of the door through which Harrowell had vanished.

Glancing around. the Ranger stiffened as he saw Pecos Pete Trimble and Andy Grellan stride into the lantern light. Gun butts swung like miniature plow handles from their hips, Trimble's weapon an outdated Spiller & Burr pistol which he had probably carried during his Civil War campaigns. The two men were smiling strangely as they halted before Hatfield.

"Not leaving us so soon, Henderson?" Trimble inquired.

"It's been a long day, boss. Thought I'd take a jaunt in the moonlight before I turn in." As he spoke, Grellan moved over to the wall and Hatfield thought with a sudden alarm, They're boxing me between them!

Trimble's voice was deceptively pleasant as he reached in his pocket and drew out a wallet.

"I always pay my men in advance, Henderson," the Flying T boss said, removing a greenback from his wallet. "Here's a month's dinero in advance."

Even as he took the bill Trimble handed him, Hatfield knew it was a crisp, freshly-printed greenback. New currency was a rarity in an out-of-the-way place like Flying T—if genuine.

Then, staring down at the bill, Hatfield saw a legend scribbled across it in his own handwriting: *Counterfeit—Hold As Evidence—Jas. Hatfield.* Along with yesterday's date and the inscription *Langtry, Tex.*

This was the selfsame bill he had confiscated from Judge Bean and mailed to Captain Roaring Bill McDowell yesterday. It was part of the stagecoach loot which Andy Grellan had brought into the Comanche Hills last night.

The Ranger knew the grim curse of the "Dinero of Doom" was materializing for him when he heard the scrape of gunmetal leaving leather and swung his glance around to where Andy Grellan stood, leaning a shoulder against the barn wall. The red-headed renegade had a gun drop on the Lone Wolf.

"Well, Jim Hatfield," Pecos Pete Trimble said, "you came to my ranch hunting for that greenback, didn't you?"

CHAPTER VI

Past Thimble Rock

AS THE bogus greenback fluttered to the floor of the stall Hatfield slowly lifted his arms, knowing to attempt a draw would bring instant death from Grellan's .45.

Trimble reached over to unbuckle Hatfield's gun harness, which he tossed into the background. A taunting, cruel grin warped the Texan's features as he stepped back, lifting his Spiller & Burr from its half-breed swivel holster.

"Dab a twine on him, Andy," Trimble ordered. "You're getting your moonlight ride tonight, Ranger, just like a few star-toters before you."

Andy Grellan moved over to Goldy's side and unbuckled Hatfield's own reata from the pommel. At his gruff-voiced order, Hatfield lowered his arms behind him and felt Grellan drop the sisal-fiber noose over his head, pinioning his arms tightly to his ribs.

"Grellan knew I was a Ranger when I first showed up at the blacksmith shop," Hatfield said, wincing as the cowboy knotted the rope around his wrists. "How come you waited so long to show your cards, Trimble?"

Trimble grinned without mirth. "It took Andy all day to get up the nerve to tell me what he over-heard between you and Roy Bean in the Judge's back room," the rancher said. "Andy knew your letter to Ranger headquarters had to be intercepted. But he wasn't so keen on letting me know what a haul he made when he stuck up that stage."

Trimble stooped to pick up the marked bill, carefully returning it to his wallet. By now Grellan had taken over his guard duties, reaiming his Colt muzzle against Hatfield's spine.

"Trailing Grellan to Flying T wasn't what brought me here, Trimble," Hatfield said evenly. "You intend to kill me. But you'll live to swing for it. The government knows the connection between you and this Dinero of Doom traffic. Your ranch is no longer the hideout it has been."

If Hatfield's bluff made any impression on Trimble, the old Confederate veteran did not show it. He led Goldy out of the stall and stood by while Grellan helped boost the Texas Ranger into the stirrups. Then, severing the excess rope with a skinning knife, Grellan tied Hatfield's ankles together under the sorrel's belly.

Grellan led his prisoner's horse out of the barn. Hitched to a corral fence near by was Grellan's bay.

Hatfield had no chance to query Trimble about Jacqueline Harrowell or her pathetic, emaciated father; Trimble had apparently given Grellan his orders before coming to the barn, for the Flying T boss headed off into the darkness toward the house.

Grellan tied a lead rope to the ring of Goldy's headstall and mounted the bay. A few moments later Grellan was leading the way off into the night, heading due north toward the rugged caprock country overlooking Flying T's sage flats.

Hatfield saw the lighted windows of the bunkhouse and had his moment of conjecture as to whether the other members of Trimble's crew were owlhooters like this red-headed captor of his. Bob Orlee, the Ranger believed, had no part in any illegal business here on Flying T. In all probability the others—Baro and McClinton—were renegades using Trimble's bunkhouse as a hideout from the law.

Beyond the Flying T grounds the basin floor tilted up, forcing the horses to a walk. Grellan picked up a thin ribbon of trail, which led in the general direction of the outcrop which Hatfield believed was the landmark called Thimble Rock. Midway up the long slope, Grellan pulled the horses in for a breather. His eyes studied Hatfield curiously in the moonlight.

"Tell me something, Hatfield," the redhead said finally. "You didn't trail me here, did you? Way I figure it, you knew that horse trader got his counterfeit bill

from Flying T, so you left Roy Bean's place with the idea of coming here anyway."

HATFIELD sensed a faint alarm in Grellan; and he intended to play on Grellan's nervous hunch to the hilt.

"I trailed you here from the spot where you killed that Wells-Fargo tooler and his shotgun guard," the Ranger said. "How? By the fact that your pony has three old shoes, one new one; and you've got a metal cap on your right boot heel."

Grellan, getting the horses back into motion, was visibly shocked by his prisoner's statement. Hatfield wasn't bluffing; he had explained exactly how he had known Grellan's guilt in advance of his showdown with Trimble. Then Grellan relaxed.

"That sandstorm last night wiped out my tracks," Grellan said defensively. "I told the boss you were coming here anyhow. For a while this evening, after I tipped off the boss that he had hired a Ranger for that Fort Stockton beef drive, he had a notion I'd been careless about my back track and led you to his door."

Hatfield felt his hopes glimmering, so far as using Grellan's fear of his boss' anger as a lever for convincing the redhead that it would be to his best interest to free his prisoner and both of them get clear of Flying T forever. Trimble had Grellan to thank for branding "Henderson" for what he was, a Texas Ranger. That alone would put Grellan ace-high with his boss.

"Where are you taking me?" Hatfield changed the subject.

"Yonder—where I've taken a few other John Laws before you. You won't be comin' back, Hatfield, as I guess you realize."

They were nearly to the ridge top now. The moon put a silver sheen on Thimble Rock's fifty-foot cone, directly ahead. The two horses headed up, trumpeting the call of their kind ahead through the night; and Hatfield caught sight of old Jeb Harrowell seated on his apaloosa at the base of the rock, watching them approach.

"Hatfield, keep quiet here," Andy Grellan growled in a low voice. Then, reining in the horses twenty feet from where the old man sat his saddle, Grellan said loudly, "Ain't you been out long enough, Jeb? You know what'll happen to Jackie if you let time slip up on you."

The old man's face resembled a skull in the moon's thin light, as, seemingly breaking out of a rapt trance, Harrowell said in his gentle voice, "Perhaps you are right, Grellan. Time races by when one is alone in the night. The ranch loses its unlovely aspects by moonlight."

Hatfield knew that any attempt to communicate with the old man, to indicate that he was a prisoner of Grellan's, might bring quick death to himself and possible trouble to Harrowell.

There was something infinitely pitiful about the old man as he spurred the apalosa into motion, jog-trotting back down the long hillslope toward where the lights of the Flying T sparkled like diamonds on sable velvet, down on the basin floor. More than ever before, Hatfield was convinced that this man of mystery was an unwilling guest on Trimble's ranch, an outsider with a background of gentility and culture, held here by the malignant grip of the rancher's power over him and his fear-haunted daughter.

"Who's the old codger, Andy?" Hatfield asked, as he and Grellan topped the ridge and passed through the clotted shadow of Thimble Rock, putting Flying T out of view behind them as the two horses headed off toward the northern badlands.

Grellan lit a brown paper cigarette, the mellow odor of the tobacco wafting to Hatfield's nostrils and reminding him that he had smoked his last smoke this side of eternity.

"Name's Harrowell," Grellan said. "I been at Fylin' T for nine years and he was here before me. Don't know who he is."

"He is the girl's father?"

"I'm damned, Hatfield, if you ain't the most talkingest hombre I ever met up with. You must have the idea you can offer me a bribe to turn you loose tonight,

or something just as foolish."

Hatfield said evenly, "It might be a good idea. I don't cotton to dying at such an early age."

Grellan made a gesture with his free hand.

"Killing you ain't a chore I relish," he admitted, "but Trimble knew he could trust me for the job. You see, Hatfield, I'm on your Ranger wanted list. I learned long ago not to trust any hombre who totes a Ranger badge. Especially you—knowin' as you do I was the drygulcher who punched the ticket of that Wells-Fargo crew yesterday."

JIM HATFIELD was unable to elicit any further talk from Grellan; the man kept the horses at a steady lope, as if eager to get where he was going and attend to his unsavory duty.

Grellan was following no established trail into the rocky heights which formed the backbone of the Comanches. There was no trail, as such. But the red-headed renegade had a definite destination in view; Hatfield knew that from the purposeful way Grellan followed arroyos and ridge crests, working his way higher and higher into some of the bleakest country on the map of Texas.

Hatfield judged that it was nearing midnight when Grellen finally reined up at the brink of a prehistoric pothole, cut off from the outside world by outlying rocky uplands.

The pothole was roughly circular in shape, fifty feet in diameter, and its bottom was lost in shadow, the moon having westered beyond the roundabout skyline. Some of these potholes were considered "bottomless," Hatfield knew; they were freaks of topography, often merely vertical caverns, plumbing deep into the earth's core. Many of them were filled with water.

A TALL TEXAS TALE

THE MONSTER MOSQUITO

C. J. NORTHCRAFT tells this one about a camping trip in the heart of what he calls "the bad mosquito country of Texas." Here, in his own words, is the way she goes:

I pitched camp a few hundred yards from a creek bed one night, and the next morning, needing water for coffee, I took a bucket and headed for the creek. Halfway there I heard a terrible whining noise that grew louder and louder.

As I reached the creek bank I saw what was making all the noise. It was a giant mosquito holding two boulders as big as horses in each wing, and he was sharpening his bill on the boulders.

I quick turned back toward camp for my gun, but the mosquito saw me and started after me. I jumped behind an oak tree that would run about average in size for that country, being probably ten feet thick and a hundred feet high.

The mosquito hit that tree with such force his bill came clear through it and nicked me in the back. Quickly I picked up a rock and bent his bill over so he couldn't pull it out of the tree, then ran toward the camp for my gun.

Well, sir, when I returned a few minutes later all I could find was a fifty foot hole in the ground where that mosquito had picked up the tree, roots, earth and all, and flew off with it. Five minutes later I pulled my tent and moved out of that bad mosquito country of Texas, because I was afraid this giant might not have been an only child. Maybe you can believe me when I say I didn't waste much time getting away off yonder.

Grellan dismounted with a creak of saddle leather and his knife blade flashed in the star shine as he severed the rope binding Hatfield's ankles together. A moment later the Ranger felt himself being hauled roughly from saddle.

Goldy snorted, as if sensing his master's imminent danger. Grellan let go his grip on Hatfield's arm and stepped back a few paces to grip his pony's reins with his left hand. With his other hand, the red-head lifted his Frontier .45 from leather.

"We call this pothole The Sheriffs' Graveyard," Grellan said, cocking the revolver. "It's handy. You won't find it on no Ranger map. Only the buzzards know what's at the bottom."

Jim Hatfield was standing less than two yards from the black brink of the pothole. He saw Grellan heft the blued-steel gun, knew that the man was in the act of shooting him pointblank.

Retreat was impossible, let alone any chance of escape.

With a harsh intake of breath, the Lone Wolf Ranger turned and lunged to the pothole's verge. He heard Grellan's .45 explode in an ear-riving torrent of sound, felt the air-whip of the bullet narrowly missing his cheek.

Then he made his leap into space and was plummeting like a rock into the pothole's unknown depths.

CHAPTER VII

The Sheriff's Graveyard

JIM HATFIELD had no memory of ending his short tumble through empty air; somewhere in his hurtling flight his senses had left him stranded in the black void of oblivion.

Daylight had returned to the Comanche Hills when the Ranger revived to full consciousness. He had difficulty in orienting himself, for he was dangling head downward in a jungle of brush, a thorny cradle which had no solidity about it and gave him the odd sensation of floating in mid-air.

Then, as lucidity returned gradually, he made sense out of his gravity-defying state of suspension.

His body, falling fifty feet, had cleared the rocky wall of the pothole, to drop into a matted thicket of *junco* and manzanita which had taken root on the pothole floor in some far-off time, growing from seeds deposited by bird or wind.

The brittle foliage had absorbed the shock of his hurtling fall, accounting for the miracle of his deliverance. In his wild leap to avoid Andy Grellan's bullet, Hatfield had made his quick decision on the faint hope that this pothole might be half-filled with rainwater, as so many natural tanks in this part of Texas frequently were.

But this pothole was utterly devoid of moisture. Staring straight down, Hatfield saw that he was less than three feet from the stone floor of the dry well; if the brush had not cushioned his fall he would have smashed his skull like an eggshell on that rocky bottom.

Hatfield's head was throbbing, each heart beat sheer agony. Judging from the angle of the rimrock's shadow, the sun must be well up in the Texas sky; he had been unconscious for four of five hours at a minimum.

With his arms bound behind his back, there was no way he could reach out to grab the brush; yet he could not endure the blood pressure on his brain from hanging head downward much longer. He knew that position had acounted for his long period of insensibility.

Summoning his strength, the Ranger kicked his legs violently. He heard the sharp popping of a manzanita branch, cracked by his threshing weight. Then something gave way and he landed heavily on the back of his shoulders, the short fall momentarily stunning him.

With great difficulty Hatfield rolled his way out from under the matting brush, into the open bottom of the pothole. Sun-heated rock beat waves of hot air against his cheeks, the sheer tufa walls of the

pothole radiating the sun's heat like the walls of a stove.

His headache diminished perceptibly as soon as he pulled himself to his feet. Sparks danced before his eyes; he knew the heat would be sheer torture as soon as the sun wheeled into view overhead and beat down into this barrel-like pit.

The lariat coils which bound his arms to his sides were somewhat loose. By squatting down and extending his elbows he was able to lift one foot, then the other over the hoop of his trussed-together wrists, putting his hands in front of him and easing somewhat the pull on his arm muscles.

There was no feeling in his hands; Andy Grellan's wrist knots had constricted his flesh, cut the circulation off. If they were not removed soon, Hatfield knew gangrene would set in.

Gradually the dizziness left his dully-aching brain. His vision cleared, and for the first time he was able to appraise the appalling circumstances of his surroundings.

He was trapped like a gopher at the bottom of a rock-lined mine shaft. Fifty feet overhead, the rim of the circular pit gave him a view of a disk of Texas sky so dazzlingly blue that it hurt his eyes to stare upwards.

The rim might as well have been a mile away; the smooth tufa walls were unscalable, the rims overhanging the bottom. Hunger and thirst were already beginning to torment Hatfield, but he knew his sanity would crack before starvation killed him.

HE RETREATED to the scant shade remaining on the south third of the pothole floor and hunkered down to size up the bottom of the pothole. His prison was roughly twenty feet in diameter, here at the bottom.

The rocky floor was littered with debris deposited here by vagrant windstorms in the past. Except for the brush, there was no greenery to indicate a possible seep of water.

And then, as his eyes gradually stopped swimming, Hatfield saw that his bones would not be alone in this hole which Andy Grellan had called by the name of "The Sheriffs' Graveyard."

Three mummified human skeletons lay sprawled under the brush directly in front of him. Whoever these dead had been, their bodies had not been profaned by scavenging buzzards or coyotes; winged creatures had been repelled by the roundabout rock walls, and no four-footed prowler of the wastelands could have survived a leap into this pit.

Hatfield felt a curdling horror in his belly as he sized up the three broken shapes. One skeleton wore a shriveled calfhide vest, on which was pinned a tarnished silver star.

"This is where Trimble stashes any star-packer who snoops around Flying T," Hatfield muttered aloud, his voice sounding strange and remote in his own ears. "This pothole makes a handy ready-made grave."

During winter season, melted snows had filled the pothole with water to a height of four feet, judging from a faded crust of alkali which made a ring around the pothole wall. Seepage and evaporation had long since deprived Hatfield of his only possible source of water.

He pulled his gaze away from the skeleton remains of three men who had tasted Trimble's vengeance ahead of him and put his attention on his wrist bonds.

Chewing the rope was his only possible chance to free his wrists; Hatfield set to work on the tough sisal fibers, fraying the rope with his teeth, until his gums and lips were bleeding.

The blazing disk of the sun appeared above the rim and the heat immediately rose by a good ten degrees. Hatfield barely had the strength to retreat into the grateful mottled shade of the junco thicket. Had a thermometer been available the Ranger would have found the temperature above one hundred and twenty.

Between stints at gnawing at his wrist bonds, Hatfield nibbled junco leaves in search of moisture, like a trapped animal.

The leaves filled his mouth with a bitter, acrid taste like medicine. That and the salty sweetness of his own blood made him nauseated.

The sun swung out of sight again, bringing some slight relief to the heat which had his lungs panting like the gills of a landed fish. Somewhere along the line, his teeth bit through the last frayed shreds of his bonds, and his hands fell at his sides, feeling like leaden weights.

He swung his arms, beat his insensate fingers against his thighs until the circulation was restored and pain began lacing his nerves as feeling returned to his extremities. Getting the watch out of his pocket was a major operation for his benumbed fingers. The hands pointed to two-thirteen in the afternoon.

Hatfield crawled out of the manzanitas. His Stetson lay to one side, where it had fallen off his head during his hurtling drop into the thicket; he put it on, grateful for the shade of the sweeping brim.

He forced himself to examine the three skeletons. The badge he had seen was engraved with the single word SHERIFF. The other two men had also carried law emblems. One, his skeletal wrists shackled together with rust-red handcuffs, had been a United States Deputy marshal, the other a Captain of the Border Patrol. The bones were not visible from overhead.

WHAT STORY lay behind these mute sprawls of human bones? That Pecos Pete Trimble was responsible for these three murders was evidenced by what Andy Grellan had said last night.

The whicker of a horse coming from overhead made Jim Hatfield start violently, thinking that Andy Grellan had returned by daylight to make sure his victim had died in his fall.

"Goldy!"

Hatfield choked on his mount's name, as he peered up to see his sorrel's magnificent head arching over the rimrock. Goldy had apparently bolted last night, avoiding Grellan's efforts to lead him back to join the Flying T remuda. The golden steed must have been standing vigil up there ever since.

The nearness of the horse which had shared his dangerous career as a Ranger brought a measure of comfort to the Lone Wolf. But it also pointed up the utter hopelessness of his situation. There was a canteen of water on Goldy's pommel, which at this moment Hatfield would have paid any price to obtain. But the canteen was as inaccessible as if it had been on another planet.

CHAPTER VIII

Dead Man's Matches

GOLDY WAS standing in hock-deep creosote brush. Sight of that drought-killed hedge put an idea in Hatfield's brain.

In ancient times, Comanches had communicated to each other with smoke signals, on these very hills. If he could get a fire going, was it not possible that the smoke might be spotted by some friendly eye, and draw a rider here to investigate? It was conceivable that there were other ranches besides the Flying T, here in the desolate Comanche Hills.

The mere fact that he had a specific chore to work on helped soothe the Ranger's intolerable strain. Scouting around under the thicket, he filled his hat crown with dry leaves, which he carried out into the open and heaped up.

A search of his pockets revealed that he had no matches. If the sun was in sight, he could have used his magnifying glass to get a blaze started; but the sun would not be visible again until tomorrow.

Despair put a brassy taste on Hatfield's tongue. Then another thought struck him: why not search the three mummified bodies of the lawmen who had died here ahead of him?

It was grisly work, exploring the pockets of the mouldy clothing worn by the skeletons. But his search was rewarded by finding a waterproof brass box in the

pocket of the unknown sheriff, the box containing twelve useable matches.

His tinder-dry fuel blazed quickly, but gave off disappointingly little smoke. Hatfield corrected that by tearing green foliage off the manzanita, which gave off a dense smudge; but the smoke pooled inside the pothole walls, not lifting above it.

Hatfield next turned his attention to the dry creosote brush which furred the entire perimeter of the rimrock overhead. That brush was the answer to his problem, if he could ignite it.

Working carefully, the Ranger prepared a makeshift torch of manzanita twigs held together with strings from his frayed bonds. Setting the torch on fire, Hatfield hurled it straight upwards with all his strength. But the flaming packet did not carry high enough to clear the rim.

The bundle was too light to be thrown fifty feet straight up. Retrieving the fuming torch, Hatfield weighted its interior with small stones.

Goldy was pawing nervously, alarmed by the smoke which was slowly lifting up from Hatfield's original fire. When the Ranger made his second throw, this time with a weighted bundle, the horse snorted in alarm and stampeded from sight as Hatfield's flaming bundle of twigs arched up and over the rimrock, to land amid the dead creosote scrub.

At once Hatfield heard the crackle of flames spreading in the creosote. Better yet, a dense fumerol of black smoke began to lift into the sky.

Coughing as the pooled smoke in the pothole irritated his lungs, Hatfield withdrew into the brush to await developments.

He realized that Pecos Pete Trimble might see smoke boiling out of the hills and ride to investigate; the signal fire might only bring hostile riders out to the pothole. If Andy Grellan should locate the fire, it would be a dead give-away that Hatfield had survived his plunge and was the human source responsible for that smoke.

Soon an artificial dusk shut off the sunlight from Hatfield, as billowing gray-black smoke clouds mushroomed over the bleak hills outside his rocky prison. Given a good wind, Hatfield knew his brush fire could sweep for miles across the drought-seared badlands, perhaps causing a conflagration which would prevent riders from approaching the pothole at all.

Then, after two hours had dragged by, Hatfield no longer heard the ominous crackle of the brush fire overhead. The smoke continued to lay in thick layers over the Comanche Hills, but it was obvious that the blaze had exhausted itself on the barren slopes.

QUITE WITHOUT warning, Hatfield saw three riders suddenly materialize on the rimrock. Through the thin haze of smoke he recognized the trio: Bob Orlee, Pecos Pete Trimble and Pablo Baro.

The men had been fighting the brush fire, out of the range of Hatfield's restricted vision; the Ranger could tell that by the charred gunnysacks slung over their saddle horns, and by the short-handled shovels they carried.

At the moment, Trimble and his two waddies were peering curiously into the pothole. Trimble, at least, knew of Andy Grellan's mission here last night; the Flying T boss must have surmised that in some fashion, Hatfield was responsible for the weed fire which had brought them out from the ranch to keep the blaze from spreading to their graze.

Hatfield crawled deeped into the screening brush, knowing that if Trimble spotted him, he was finished

Lying motionless as a lizard, the Lone Wolf Ranger saw the men dismount, to beat out isolated pockets of smouldering fire with their gunnysacks.

Trimble and Baro disappeared over the skyline, working their way out of Hatfield's view. For the moment at least, young Bob Orlee was the only one in sight.

Taking the desperate gamble that Bob Orlee might be a friend rather than a foe, Hatfield scuttled out into the open. Orlee was stamping out the last lingering sparks

in a clump of creosote on the north rim of the pothole.

An instant later Orlee caught sight of Hatfield. The young puncher stiffened, opening his mouth as if to shout, then closing it as Hatfield frantically signaled him to be quiet.

It was a glimpse of the Ranger's badge which Hatfield held up for him to see that made Orlee nod in understanding. The young puncher looked away, in the direction of his two companions; then he glanced back into the pothole and made a small signal for Hatfield to get back under cover.

The Ranger did so, peering up at Orlee through the deep foliage. He saw Orlee take out Durham sack and cigarette papers and start rolling himself a smoke.

Working casually, Orlee took a shingle nail from his pocket and, using it like a pencil, appeared to be writing something on the cardboard cover of the cigarette-paper book.

Then, lighting up his smoke, Orlee carelessly tossed the book of cigarette papers into the pothole, as if he had used it up and was merely discarding the cover.

Shortly thereafter Trimble and the breed returned to mount their horses. Trimble peered into the pothole, trying to penetrate the smoke haze for a glimpse of the lawman Grellan had hurled into the pit last night.

Then Trimble shrugged, gathered up his reins, and muttered something to his men. Orlee mounted, and the three were gone.

Hatfield released a pent-up breath, relief flooding him. If Trimble had entertained any real suspicion that his victim was alive, he would have lowered himself into the pothole by rope for a closer inspection.

The Ranger waited a full hour before crawling out of hiding. He had marked the spot where Orlee's cigarette book had fallen in the rubble. He found his hands shaking with suspense as he picked up the cardboard booklet and read Orlee's nail-scratched message.

It was three words long: WILL COME TONIGHT.

Hatfield was not mistaken in Orlee being an enemy of his employer's. The young puncher had been obviously puzzled at Hatfield's presence in the pothole; since the other three victims' skeletons were not visible from the rimrock, it was probable that Orlee had no knoweldge The Sheriffs' Graveyard existed here.

CHAPTER IX

The Harrowell Saga

VIEWED FROM the standpoint of Jim Hatfield, who was growing steadily weaker from hunger, the wait for sunset seemed endless. A night breeze cleared the lingering smoke blanket to reveal the Texas stars, but as hours dragged on with no sign of Orlee's return, Hatfield began to wonder if he had been double-crossed by the youth.

His over-wrought imagination thought up a dozen reasons to account for Orlee's delay in returning here. Perhaps Trimble had sent his men on their journey to Fort Stockton to pick up cattle and horses; if so it would be difficult, it not impossible, for Orlee to break away from the group.

Or possibly Trimble, after a conference with Andy Grellan, had decided that Hatfield was still alive, therefore the cause of the mysterious brush fire at the pothole. In that event Orlee might have been overtaken by hostile riders, likewise headed out here tonight.

The moon had not yet risen. Hatfield could see Goldy up on the rimrock from time to time, proof that the sorrel had again escaped being roped by Trimble's riders.

It was ten o'clock by Hatfield's pocket watch when he heard Goldy snort nervously and wheel away out of sight from the rimrock's brink. Moments thereafter Hatfield's ears picked up an abrasive scrape of steel-shod hoofs on rubble, as a rider approached the pothole.

Tense and apprehensive, Hatfield

crouched at the edge of the brushy thicket as he saw a man on horseback approach the rim and dismount. In the dim starlight, he could not identify the rider.

Then his fears were set at rest as he heard Bob Orlee's husky voice: "Henderson?"

The Ranger scuttled out into the open and called softly, "I'm here, Orlee. You alone?"

He saw Orlee shaking out the coils of a rawhide lass'-rope. A moment later the fifty-foot lariat came hurtling toward the prisoner at the pit of The Sheriff's Graveyard, the honda end within reach of Hatfield's raised arms.

While the Ranger was fitting the noose under his armpits, Orlee was dallying the upper end of the reata to his saddle horn.

"I'll walk you up the wall, Henderson," Orlee called down. "You all set down there?"

"Pull away."

Hatfield felt the rope tighten about his ribs as Orlee led his peg pony back from the rimrock's verge. Then the Ranger's feet left the ground and, gripping the rope tightly with both hands, he began "walking" up the beetling tufa wall.

Orlee was waiting at the rimrock to seize Hatfield's arms as his trained cow horse held the rope taut. Before the Ranger could scramble out into the burned creosote brush, Goldy was at his side, nuzzling his cheek. To Hatfield in that moment, the horse's caress was like a woman's kiss.

Hatfield's first thought was for water, but Orlee had anticipated that; he put a cool canvas water bag into Hatfield's hands, and stood by anxiously as the lawman gulped down sweet drafts of revivifying water.

"That's enough for now," Orlee said, pulling the water bag out of Hatfield's grasp. "I got grub for you, Henderson. You must of been through torture. Did your horse buck you down there?"

Hatfield took Orlee's strong hand and pumped it. For the first time, he felt the toll his ordeal had taken from him; his knees were rubbery, his muscles quivering with almost complete exhaustion.

"My name isn't Henderson," the Ranger said. "I'm Jim Hatfield. I'm a Texas Ranger. Andy Grellan put me down there."

ORLEE'S BOYISH face showed its astonishment as he saw the starshine glint on the circle-enclosed star badge Hatfield produced. Speaking tersely, Hatfield explained the circumstances of his capture last night and the miracle of his survival.

"You're lucky Grellan wasn't on the ranch to spot that smoke, then," Orlee commented. "Trimble sent him to town this morning with the wagon after supplies. Baro and me were digging a cistern when the boss pointed out the smoke and said we better mosey over for a look-see."

Hatfield said, "I'm surprised Trimble didn't catch on that I set that fire, especially when he found it so close to the hole."

Orlee shook his head. "Boss found an old bottle in the weeds and decided the sun had turned it into a burning glass. And of course he didn't tell me what he used the pothole for. Well, I'll get the grub I brought you."

Orlee unbuckled a saddle-bag and presented Hatfield with the ingredients of a banquet: a beefsteak sandwich, a can of tomato juice, a bottle of cold coffee.

As he started wolfing down the welcome food, the Ranger said earnestly, "You understand I'm out here to help you, Bob. I'd like to know who Jeb Harrowell is—and why he and his daughter are living under duress at Flying T."

Bob hunkered down alongside Hatfield. Unlike yesterday, he now appeared eager to reveal long-kept personal secrets.

"Jeb Harrowell's wife was related to Trimble. Jeb come down with T B, back in Missouri. Jackie was only eight then. He come out to Texas to recuperate—and made the mistake of looking up Trimble. That was ten years ago."

Hatfield's next question took Orlee by surprise: "Is Jeb Harrowell a professional artist, by any chance? An etcher?"

"Yes, he is. And a good one. But how

would you know that? Did Jackie tell you?"

"No," Hatfield said. "I figured it out myself. You see, the other day in Bean's saloon at Langtry, I saw an etching of the Alamo, signed by an artist with the same initials as mine, J. H. The Judge told me the story back of that etching—how a consumptive drifter swapped it to him for a bottle of rotgut, and then vanished, with a little girl of eight."

BOB ORLEE'S eyes flashed with bitterness. "Vanished is right. He's spent all those years since on Flying T—as a 'guest' of his wife's uncle. I'm the only outsider who knows that, Hatfield."

"But how could Trimble hold him here against his will?"

"Easily enough. Daytimes, Trimble keeps the old man locked up in the ranch house attic. Trimble tells the crew that old Jeb is a dangerous lunatic, that if word got out that he was living at Flying T, the authorities would slap him in an asylum."

Hatfield pondered this tragic information for a moment. Then he said. "Do you think Jeb is—mentally off, Bob?"

Orlee shrugged. "He acts sort of daft, I'll admit. But who wouldn't, kept cooped up like a leper? He only gets a sniff of fresh air evenings. That's all that keeps him alive."

"I know," Hatfield mused. "All the old codger has to look forward to, apparently, is his nightly jaunt to Thimble Rock. But why don't he and Jacqueline just keep on riding some night?"

Orlee's jaws ground together, emotion harshening his voice.

"Why? Because whenever Jeb is away from the house, Trimble is holding Jackie hostage, locked up in that attic cell. He's threatened to harm Jackie if Jeb ever over-stays his time. It's an iron-tight trap, Hatfield, for both of them. Lord knows I've spent five years trying to figure out how to break it."

Hatfield understood, now, why Harrowell had been so willing to leave Thimble Rock and return to his grim prison.

"The same rule applies to Jackie, daytimes," Orlee went on. "She's free to ride around the ranch, providing she doesn't stray out of the valley. If she should run off—alone or with me—she knows Trimble would kill her father. That has held her a prisoner on Flying T almost as long as she can remember."

Hatfield finished the last crumb of food which the puncher had brought him, but his hunger was still unsated. Orlee went on, as if eager to talk over his personal affairs with a sympathetic listener, "When you run across me and Jackie the other morning, we were quarreling. I told her she owed it to herself to let me take her away from Flying T, even if it meant leaving the old man behind. The way things are, I'm afraid Jackie will go crazy."

"You love her," Hatfield said gently. "I'm surprised you haven't taken the Harrowells away from Trimble at gun's point, if necessary."

Orlee laughed bitterly, and slapped his own flanks, which were devoid of shell belt or holstered weapon.

"Trimble won't allow me to carry guns, or even own a gun. I'm hired to punch cows and mend fences. And I've given my pledged word to Jackie not to go to the law with my story. After all, if Harrowell *is* insane, the state would lock him up. And Pecos Pete Trimble has the law on his side—he's had himself appointed Jeb's legal guardian. Or so he claims."

Hatfield stood up, flexing his sore muscles.

"Bob," he said, switching the subject away from Orlee's personal problems, "I came out to Flying T to find out if Trimble has any connection with a counterfeiting ring operating out of Old Mexico. But I'm willing to drop that investigation long enough to help you get Jackie and her father permanently and safely out of Trimble's grasp."

Orlee said thoughtfully, "I've often wondered if Trimble was working on some skullduggery, outside the law. I know his ranch don't make enough to keep him in beans and eatin' tobacco. I

also know that he hires McClinton and Baro more as gunslingers and bodyguards than anything else. I attend to the only cow work around the place. And I wouldn't be here if it weren't for Jackie."

Hatfield said, "I'll need guns in order to force a showdown with Trimble. If you can't get them for me, I'll ride down to Langtry and—"

"No, Jim!" Orlee cut in, a desperate note entering his voice. "You can't buck Trimble's set-up. All you can do is get out of here."

Orlee headed for his pony, coiling up his rope as he went. Jim Hatfield, following him, was dismayed to find that he was so weak he could hardly keep pace with Orlee's long strides.

The cowboy mounted, staring down at Hatfield as he said, "You've got your horse. Use him, Jim. Drop this case. Even if you came back with a whole company of your Rangers, the first thing Trimble would do would be to kill Jackie and the old man."

Hatfield started to speak, but Orlee was already backing the pony away.

"When I left the bunkhouse tonight," Orlee said, "I was supposed to be riding over to Langtry. If I'm not back for breakfast tomorrow there'll be trouble. So long, Jim."

Hatfield made no further comment as Orlee spurred off into the night, headed south toward Flying T. After all, the puncher had taken extreme personal risks, coming out here on Hatfield's behalf tonight. The Ranger could not reasonably expect any further sacrifice from Orlee. From here on out, Hatfield was on his own.

CHAPTER X

Death at Thimble Rock

DUSK OF THE following day found the Lone Wolf Ranger crouched in a rocky fissure of the ridge directly north of Thimble Rock.

He had slept through most of this day, in a brushy rincon within sight of the rocky landmark. Goldy was on picket at the rincon now; Hatfield had made his way to this lookout point on foot just after sundown.

The water in Goldy's canteen, plus a chocolate bar found in his saddle-bags, had been his only nourishment; but the long sleep had revived his physical powers tremendously and he felt fit for the showdown he hoped to bring about on Flying T very shortly.

His saddle-bags contained several boxes of .45 and .30-30 calibered ammunition, but the rifle boot under his saddle fender was empty; Trimble had pre-empted his Winchester before sending Hatfield away from the ranch in Grellan's custody.

Unarmed, the Ranger knew it would be foolhardy to make a direct approach to Trimble's ranch. But he believed that old Jeb Harrowell or his daughter might be enlisted to smuggle firearms to him.

As darkness deepened and the Milky Way came out in all its primitive glory in the Texas sky, Hatfield kept his full attention on the ridge crest below Thimble Rock. This was the hour when Jeb Harrowell was due to make his nightly "constitutional" to the landmark and back. With Jackie being held as hostage at the Flying T ranch house, Trimble apparently did not feel it necessary to send an escort with Harrowell.

This night was calm and peaceful. Sounds carried for miles; Hatfield could hear horses stamping in the stalls down in the Flying T barn, the remote yammer of a coyote baying at the stars, the swish of wings as a cruising screech owl soared overhead in quest of field mice.

Soon the Ranger's ears picked up the abrasive crunch of a horse's hoofs beating up the ridge. He waited until he saw the silhouetted shape of a rider top the rise at the base of Thimble Rock, and knew from the stooped outline of the man in saddle that it was Jebediah Harrowell.

Leaving his hideout, Jim Hatfield approached Thimble Rock from the rear,

moving with caution. At the base of the pitted stone tower he paused, keening the night to make sure that no other rider had accompanied Harrowell out from the ranch.

Then, skirting the base of Thimble Rock, Hatfield heard Harrowell crooning softly to himself as his eyes drank in the haunting beauty of the roundabout land.

Harrowell's pony—the same horse he had ridden previously—caught Hatfield's scent as the Ranger moved away from the Rock. Harrowell snatched up the reins and twisted around in saddle, starting visibly as he saw Hatfield move up quickly and reach out to seize a bridle ring.

"Ah, the stranger who turned up missing at Jackie's table today," Harrowell said, as the Ranger removed his Stetson to let the starshine show on his upturned face. "We feared that you had become the victim of foul play, Mr. Henderson. Others had disappeared before you—"

The Texas Ranger badge glittered in Hatfield's palm as he moved up closer to Harrowell's stirrup.

"I am a Texas Ranger, Jeb. Jim Hatfield."

Harrowell's sensitive face went grave. He listened intently as Hatfield went on swiftly: "I realize your time is limited and that I've got to talk fast. Did you talk to Bob Orlee today— or did he tell your daughter about meeting me last night?"

THE OLD MAN shook his head. "I am never permitted to talk to Orlee or anyone else."

Hatfield said, "I understand. Listen: I know who you are and that you have been a prisoner here for many years. If you help me, I can get you away from the Trimble ranch."

Harrowell started to interrupt, but Hatfield went on: "I need guns and food. I want you to have Jackie bring them out here to Thimble Rock tomorrow. Tell her to stash them behind that prickly pear clump yonder, where I can pick them up after she is safely away. Will you do that, Jeb? Do you understand?"

Harrowell laughed softly. "I understand perfectly. You think I am mentally incompetent, don't you?"

Jim Hatfield said simply, "I think you are a man of rare courage and brains. Smart enough to brand the counterfeit currency plates Trimble forced you to engrave for him with the brand of Trimble's ranch, hoping that some day, someone would catch on. Am I right, Jeb?"

Harrowell's face took on a new vitality as he whispered, "God has answered my prayers. I am the man you seek."

"Then will you have your daughter bring me guns and food?"

"I will try."

Hatfield released his grip on the pony's bridle.

"Fine! Leave everything else to me. Tell Jackie that I will be nowhere in sight when she reaches this rendezvous. She will run no risks here."

Harrowell picked up his reins.

"Many years ago," the old man said, "I prepared a little object which I hoped might some day prove useful in bringing about my deliverance. Even my daughter does not know this object exists. I will have her bring it out to Thimble Rock tomorrow. It is a package wrapped in brown paper. Study its contents closely. In case anything should happen to me, it will be vitally important."

Hatfield nodded. "What's in the package?"

"There is no time to go into that now. God bless you, Jim Hatfield. You have brought hope to an old man—hope which I thought forever dead, long ago. It is not for myself that I have grieved, but for my little girl."

Jebediah Harrowell swung the apaloosa around and headed off toward the twinkle of lights marking the Flying T. Somehow, those lights did not seem so malignant now.

Back through the night came the old man's cracked voice, lifted in a paeon of praise to his Maker: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord—"

A nooning sun found Jim Hatfield in the shelter of his rocky covert down the north

slope below Thimble Rock.

He saw Jacqueline Harrowell riding along the ridge into the shadow of the landmark.

The girl had a pair of field glasses slung from her saddle horn, and the hidden Ranger saw her pick up the glasses and sweep them around the horizons for several minutes.

She was dressed in a bright red blouse and men's levis this morning; the sun gleamed brightly on hair that clustered under her sombrero like metal turnings.

If she were searching for Hatfield's location, she was doomed to disappointment; for the Ranger knew that she was visible from the ranch in the basin beyond, and that it would be fatal for his plans if Trimble realized she was keeping a rendezvous with any outsider at Thimble Rock.

After a few minutes, Jackie Harrowell dismounted and led her horse over to the shade of Thimble Rock. She appeared to merely be tightening her saddle girth; actually, Hatfield believed, she was delivering food and guns to the spot which her father had designated.

Hatfield's pulses were racing by the time the girl remounted and, without a backward glance, headed out of sight beyond the ridge, apparently bound on an aimless joy-ride.

IT WAS not until mid-afternoon that the Ranger left his hideout and began his cautious approach to the Rock. He slithered from sage clump to sage clump, knowing the danger of being spotted by any of Trimble's cruising riders. Yet it was imperative that he get possession of a gun as soon as possible; without a weapon he felt naked on this hostile range.

Brush grew in thick hedges around the base of Thimble Rock. Reaching that

A TALL TEXAS TALE

COTTON TOP

JOE HORN and his cotton hands lay in the noonday shade of a scrub oak and looked out at the long rows of Texas cotton.

"Georgia," Joe said. "That's where they raise the cotton. Why, I mind some of the crops we had there when we were kids. Had to use a step-ladder to pick it."

"You shoulda been in Texas in those early days before the land kind of played out," said a wrinkled old hand who was known simply as Windy. "I'll never forget the first time I ever planted down here. She was just after a rain, with a hot wind blowin' across the land, and soon as I kicked dirt over the seed, the plant jumped out of the ground and nigh tipped me on my ear.

"Aye, you never saw anything grow like that. She just shot up fast as the eye could see till the top grew plumb out of sight. Felt like it was raining then, but when I didn't get wet I took a look around. The ground was covered with boll weevils who must've starved or froze to death chasin' that cotton top.

"I figured the only way I'd get the cotton off that bush was to chop her down, but when I hit her a lick with an ax it didn't do a speck of good. The notch I'd cut with one swing would be twenty-nine feet up in the air by the time I'd swing again. What I mean, that was cotton!"

"You're the biggest liar east of the Pecos, Windy," one of the other hands said. "But how'd you ever get that cotton, anyway?"

Windy looked hurt and got up and put his battered hat on straight. "No point in tellin' you," he said, "since you wouldn't believe me, nohow." And with that he grabbed his hat and jumped straight up out of sight.

cover, Hatfield worked his way around to the west face of the pinnacle, until he was behind the clump of prickly pear cactus where Jeb Harrowell had instructed his daughter to leave her package.

Off in the distance below, Hatfield had his view of Trimble's barns and outbuildings, corral and windmill. Someone—Hatfield believed it was Trimble himself—was working in front of the blacksmith shop, the strokes of his maul on a wagon wheel tire ringing across the valley like a bell.

Over in the yard nearer the house, three men were busy excavating a cistern. Baro, McClinton, and Orlee. That left Grellan, the most dangerous of all the Flying T crew, unaccounted for. Perhaps he was not yet back from Langtry with his supply wagon.

On hands and knees, Hatfield crawled over toward the cactus clump. Visible in its shadow was a gunnysack.

Hatfield slid on his belly until he could reach the sack and dump out its contents. Disappointment was his first reaction, for Jackie Harrowell's cache contained no gun of any description.

"Trimble probably keeps his firearms under lock and key," Hatfield theorized. "The man takes no chances."

There was ample food—canned meats and vegetables, condensed milk, a jug of water, a bag of dried prunes. There was a note pinned to the bag of prunes, written in a girl's hand:

Impossible to bring guns.

Hatfield turned his attention to the rectangular package which completed the objects in the sack: a flat package bound in brown paper, sealed with red wax. It was roughly eight by ten inches in dimensions, by a quarter inch thick. From its weight and rigidity, Hatfield knew the parcel contained metal.

This was the mysterious item which Harrowell had hinted was vitally important to any lawman investigating the Flying T. Even without opening the package, the Ranger believed he could guess the nature of its contents.

He hurriedly restored the supplies to the gunnysack. Examining Harrowell's parcel could wait until he was once more back in the rincon where he had left Goldy.

He thought, "I'll have to ride down to Langtry to rustle up a carbine and a pair of Colts." He was turning to head back toward the brush girdling Thimble Rock when a harsh voice lashed out at him from the direction of the valley:

"All right, Hatfield—hold it!"

The Ranger leaped to his feet, spinning in the direction of the voice, clutching the gunnysack to his chest.

Emerging from the brush at the southwest corner of Thimble Rock came the beefy shape of Andy Grellan. A cocked .45 which Hatfield recognized as one of his own guns was in the redheaded renegade's fist.

"Maybe you're a spook, to be out of that pothole," Grellan said, halting a dozen feet away, "but I doubt if Jackie would be keepin' any dates with a ghost."

Despair was a cold sensation in Hatfield's chest. For a second time he found himself under Grellan's gun drop. This time he knew the red-head would finish the job in his own way.

"Jackie never rides out this direction—it's against the boss' rules," Grellan went on. "That's why I decided to take a little pasear over here and hole up in the brush. The minute I seen that gunnysack behind the cactus yonder, I knew it was bait for some kind of game. I never thought it would be bait for the Lone Wolf."

With a cold laugh, Grellan lifted his Colt and squeezed trigger.

HATFIELD felt the slamming impact of the point-bink slug against his chest, over his heart. He fell backwards, dropping the gunnysack, and rolled over on his back.

If death was like this, Hatfield was surprised; for he could see the blue Texas sky, a lone buzzard wheeling past the shoulder of Thimble Rock.

A numbness paralyzed his muscles, yet he felt no pain. The bullet had been aimed

at his heart; at such short range Greelan couldn't have missed.

He heard the rasp of leather and metal as Grellan holstered his gun; then the crunch of boots on rubble as the Flying T compuncher strode over to pick up the gunnysack.

Grelland's boots were inches away from Hatfield's outflung right arm. The Ranger could see the gunhawk thrust an arm into the paper sack, investigating its contents.

With explosive suddenness, the fallen Ranger rolled over and locked an arm between Grellan's knees. The red-head bellowed, caught off guard. A moment later he was falling, as Hatfield came to his knees, letting go of Grellan's leg.

Grellan landed on his back, but he was not so overcome by surprise that he could not reach for his gun. He had the .45 half out of leather when Hatfield's left hand locked over his wrist, blocking his draw.

The red-head started to regain his feet, only to have his head rocked back by a hammering punch to the jaw. But Hatfield realized his strength had been too sapped by the ordeal of the past two days for him to be any match for this gargantuan cowpoke.

Hatfield's right hand fell on the ground as Grellan twisted away, yanking at his gun. The Ranger felt his grip on Grellan's gun wrist loosening.

With a groan of desperation, Jim Hatfield snatched up a chunk of rock broken off the landmark overhead. He drew back his arm and hurled the talus fragment with all his strength.

The stone caught Grellan in the left temple, where the skull structure was most vulnerable. Hatfield heard the sickening pop of bone fracturing, like the crunch of a melon rind. Blood flew, and Grellan was sagging groundward, his gun arm going limp under Hatfield's fingers.

Breathing hard, Hatfield came to his feet, jerking the six-gun out of Grellan's holster and reversing it in his hand, thumb earing the knurled hammer to full cock.

But he would not have to use the gun. Grellan was dead, his brain tissue oozing from the wound on his temple. Hatfield had exacted the last full measure of retribution for whatever he had suffered at this gunman's hands, during the brief seconds of their struggle. The Wells-Fargo massacre had been avenged.

Hatfield glanced off toward the valley, wondering if the sound of the single gunshot had raised an alarm down at the ranch. The wind was wrong, the distance great; Hatfield saw that Orlee and Baro were still working in the yard, Trimble still hammering in front of the blacksmith shop.

With feverish haste, the Ranger unbuckled the double gun harness from the dead man's waist, recognizing the gear as his own, appropriated by Grellan following their capture of the Ranger in Trimble's barn two nights ago.

Not until he had thonged down his holsters and cinched the belts tight did Hatfield pull the gunnysack from off Grellan's other arm.

As he did so, the mysterious rectangular package wrapped in heavy butcher paper fell from the sack.

IN RETRIEVING it, Hatfield read the reason for his own escape from being drilled by Grellan's bullet. The metal object which the package contained had been bent convex by the impact of a bullet, the leaden smudge of which had punched through the paper wrapper.

Harrowell had all unknowingly sent Jim Hatfield a plate of armour which had absorbed the shocking velocity of the .45 bullet from Grellan's gun.

Back in the brush below Thimble Rock, the Lone Wolf ripped off the paper wrapping to expose the object which had saved his life. It was a thick plate of pure red copper. The bullet had punched a nipple-shaped protruberance in one corner of the plate, but the slug had spent its force without puncturing the copper barrier.

Hatfield turned the metal plate over, and then recognized it for what it was—an etching plate, the surface of which bore an exquisitely-engraved specimen of the master etcher's art.

At first glance, the Ranger could not

fathom why the etching plate was so important in Harrowell's opinion. The artist's stylus had engraved a Western scene in the copper—mountains and valleys, a lone yucca against the sky, the sun low in the West. Spencerian letters, engraved in reserve along the bottom of the picture, read *"My Masterpiece*—by J. H."

And then, studying the engraving more closely, Hatfield recognized a prominent object in the foreground—Thimble Rock. This panorama, then, depicted the view of the northern Comache Hills, as the artist had seen it from this very point, by moon and starlight. But what secret significance did this innocent-appearing landscape hold?

CHAPTER XI

Secret of Flying T

WESTWARD the sun was sinking toward the purple peaks of the Davis range, when Jim Hatfield made his way back to the cactus-screened rincon where he had left Goldy on picket.

He emptied Jackie Harrowell's water jug into the crown of his Stetson and let the sorrel drink it empty. Then, after a meal of canned meat and vegetables and condensed milk, the Ranger settled himself to a detailed study of Jeb Harrowell's mysterious etching plate.

The aging artist's skill was as evident in this picture as had been his other handiwork that Hatfield had seen—the counterfeit bills, the Alamo picture hanging on the wall of Judge Roy Bean's saloon. Seen at certain angles, the etching took on a startling reality, as if he were inspecting a mirrored reflection of the roundabout Comanche Hills.

Then, studying the carved copper surface of the plate with his jeweler's loupe, Hatfield found Harrowell's familiar signature—the word *Bogus* followed by the Flying T insignia. In this case the engraving was underscored by a deep, broad-headed arrow, pointed upwards.

A new respect for Harrowell's integrity came to Jim Hatfield as he tried to mentally reenact the events which had led to the artist turning his genius to counterfeiting.

Ten years ago, suffering from consumption, Harrowell had left his native Missouri with Jacqueline, then a little girl, in the hope that he could find his wife's uncle, Pete Trimble, a relative who could raise his daughter after he had succumbed to the ravages of his disease.

But the high, dry climate of West Texas must have cured Harrowell's tuberculosis. And Pete Trimble, recognizing the old man's sheer genius as an etcher, must have conceived the idea of putting Harrowell's talents to illicit use.

Trimble had probably given Harrowell three genuine bank notes to copy, in ten, twenty and fifty-dollar denominations. Hatfield believed he knew what Trimble's grip had been on the artist: either engrave the counterfeit plates, duplicating them exactly—or see Jackie killed.

But Harrowell's keen brain had conceived the idea of using his stylus to brand each printing plate with the proof of its spurious origin: the tiny word "bogus," and the Flying T brand.

Hatfield turned his attention back to the arrow which underlined the microscopic inscription on the plate.

The head of the arrow pointed to a shadow in a sugarloaf-shaped mountain peak in the center of the picture. Was Harrowell attempting to direct special attention to that mountain? And if so, for what purpose?

The Ranger crawled up out of the rincon for a first-hand view of the subject of Harrowell's etched landscape.

The sun was now behind the landmark which Hatfield mentally dubbed "Sugarloaf Peak." The deep cleft of a canyon put a crease down the eastern face of the peak, like a dent in a hat crown. That canyon was the object the engraved arrow pointed out.

Suddenly Hatfield knew he must investigate that canyon, especially since he no

longer had to ride to Langtry for firearms. Something was over there about which Harrowell wanted him to know. The showdown at Trimble's ranch could come later tonight.

He returned to the pit of the rincon, threw his saddle on Goldy, and headed northward to put a long transverse ridge between him and Thimble Rock.

Dusk was pooling over the sinister Comanche Hills by the time Hatfield passed over the blackened, burned-out area which the fire had caused around the pothole known as The Sheriff's Graveyard. Hatfield could not look at that cavity without a shudder, remembering his own ordeal there.

SUGARLOAF PEAK lay a mile directly west of the pothole. By the time Hatfield reached the mouth of the canyon which had been pointed out by the arrow on Harrowell's etched copper plate, a full moon was lifting over the Pecos bottoms to the east.

Approaching the canyon from below, Hatfield saw no outward signs to indicate that men had ever been here. No brush grew on the crumbling lavarock slopes of the canyon; no trail entered it, so far as Hatfield could see.

Knowing he could not rest content until he had followed the canyon to its head half-way up the thousand-foot peak, the Texas Ranger pushed on into the ravine, alternately traveling through pit blackness and gleaming moonlight as the bottom of the canyon made its aimless zigzagging.

Then, half way up the canyon's length, he saw the artificially-built pile of crumbled rock spilling away from a hole in the canyon wall, like wood-dust cast out of a hole by a burrowing worm.

Some prospector, perhaps back in the Spanish days, had dug this prospect hole mid-way up the slope of Sugarloaf Peak. There was no other way to account for the man-made cavern.

The tailings heap was too unstable for Goldy to climb. Dismounting, Hatfield headed up the slope alone, the full moon guiding him up to the mouth of the prospect shaft.

The grotto was little higher than a man's head, and penetrated the country rock at a slight downward angle. It could well be the den of a cougar; rattlesnakes were almost certain to be lurking in there. Even with his twin guns at his belt, Hatfield felt a tremor of uneasines at the prospect of entering the cave.

But he was convinced that this abandoned mine was the object Jebediah Harrowell wanted him to discover, the reason the artist had produced his etching in the first place. To leave the scene unsearched was unthinkable.

Hatfield located a dead mesquite scrub growing from a fissure in the rock wall near the cavern's mouth. He broke off a pitch-filled limb and lighted it to use as a torch.

Entering the cave, he saw that the rock ceiling lowered until he was forced to move at a crouch. The air was fetid with the musky smell of rattlesnakes.

The blazing mesquite torch sent its shuttering glare ahead of the Lone Wolf as he penetrated deeper into the tunnel, loose rubble grinding under his cowboots.

Then he saw the dead end of the hole directly ahead of him. Built across that wall of rock was a crude table of whipsawed planking, of fairly recent construction.

Hatfield lunged forward, catching sight of an oil lantern hanging from a shoring timber overhead. The torch was going out, turning into a charred, glowing stump in his fingers.

With feverish haste, the Ranger jacked open the chimney of the lantern and touched a match to the oily wick. As the lantern dispelled the thick shadows of the tunnel, other objects were sharply revealed.

He saw a cigar box lying on the table, alongside a strange-looking apparatus which proved to be a sheet of plate glass smeared with green ink, on which was a printer's roller. On the other end of the bench was a piece of machinery which the Ranger identified readily as a printing

press of the screw type, such as etchers used for striking off impressions from their engraved plates. This was the type of press which Jebediah Harrowell had undoubtedly carried with him from Missouri, ten years before.

Setting the lantern down, Hatfield opened the cigar box. It contained half a dozen copper plates, oblong in shape—plates used in the printing of counterfeit bills in fifty, twenty and ten-dollar denominations.

A GUST of air whistled through Hatfield's teeth as he inspected one of the plates in the lantern's light, the one bearing General U.S. Grant's portrait. His jeweler's loupe disclosed the microscopic word *"bogus"* etched into the cross-hatched shadings of Grant's left cheek.

This was the very plate that had produced the spurious bill which Hatfield had taken from Judge Bean down at Langtry.

Hatfield's pulses were hammering with excitement. This dead-end hole in the heart of an unnamed Texas mountain peak, then, was the counterfeiting plant which the government had been seeking all these years, under the mistaken idea that the money was being smuggled across the Rio Grande.

The Ranger turned his attention to the collection of packing boxes tiered under the bench. One of them contained packets of Chinese rice paper, used to imitate the stock used by the Treasury Department at Washington for the manufacture of the national currency.

Pecos Pete Trimble did not make this paper, Hatfield was sure. In all probability it was smuggled in from the Orient by way of Mexico.

But the actual counterfeit money was printed here, here in the heart of the Comanche Hills—using plates engraved by the master engraver of them all, Jebediah Harrowell.

Further examination of the cavern revealed nothing else of interest. Hatfield had found what he had crossed the Pecos in search of; thanks to the etched landscape which Harrowell had provided him.

Without that key map, Hatfield knew that Trimble's hideout would have escaped detection for all time, as well-concealed as this grotto was.

He pocketed the printing plates because they were easily carried; there would be plenty of time to pick up the press and the stock of rice paper, after Pecos Pete Trimble and his crew were in custody.

As the Texas Ranger moved back out of the prospect hole into the bright glare of the moon, a mutter of excited voices down-canyon arrested him in his tracks.

He swung around, drawing both Colts as he did so, to stare down the slope of mine tailings to where he had left Goldy.

Two horsemen bracketed the sorrel now, talking excitedly: Sam McClinton and Pablo Baro, Trimble's bodyguards.

Before Hatfield could duck back into the shelter of the cavern at his back, the two outlaws spotted him.

Moonrays flashed on darting steel as Baro and McClinton whipped out their belt guns and drove a deadly fire up the slope at the Texas Ranger.

Lead whistled past Hatfield's ears, caromed off the lava rocks behind him as he dropped to one knee, lifting the Colt in his right hand to steady it over his left forearm.

The two gunmen were firing wildly, in the first reaction of their surprise; the canyon was a deafening backdrop for the explosions of their fast-triggered Colts.

A slug burned the muscle on the Ranger's left forearm and brought the warm feel of blood under his sleeve as he got Pablo Baro's big bulk under his sights and squeezed trigger.

He saw the half-breed spill from saddle, his horse pulling away in stampede.

As he swung his Colt to cover McClinton he saw the big outlaw dive from stirrups to seek the scanty shelter of a nearby ocotillo clump.

THEN Hatfield held his fire as he heard the outlaw's firing pin snap on a spent cartridge.

"Hold it—and elevate, McClinton!" Hatfield shouted, drawing a dead bead on the

cowhand's big shape down there.

McClinton's choked curse reached Hatfield's ears as the clamoring echoes of gunfire receded down the canyon notch. Then McClinton's .45 rattled in the rocks as he threw his gun aside and stood up behind the ocotillo, arms groping skyward.

"Hold your fire—I'm your meat, Hatfield!" McClinton called up.

On the alert for treachery, Jim Hatfield started his skidding descent of the tailings pile, holding Trimble's bodyguard under his gun for a quick pot-shot if McClinton dug for the second gun at his belt.

But McClinton's surrender was genuine; he turned his back to the Ranger as Hatfield approached, and remained stock still while the lawman hooked the muzzle of his own six-gun under the curved butt of the outlaw's weapon and flipped it to one side.

"Just stand hitched," Hatfield ordered, "while I have a look at your pardner."

Keeping his sixes trained on McClinton's back, Hatfield sidled over for a look at Pablo Baro, who lay on his chest at Goldy's feet. The half-breed was dead; a rivulet of blood was leaking from a bullet hole punched through one temple.

Turning back to McClinton, Hatfield said icily, "Turn around, bucko . . . What were you and Baro doing here? Did you spot me crossing the badlands?"

McClinton turned slowly to face the Lone Wolf Ranger.

"No. The boss had ordered us up here to clean out that counterfeitin' plant of his."

"Trimble? Why?"

McClinton shrugged. "When Andy Grelland's horse come in this afternoon without Andy, we back-trailed him and the boss found where you'd bashed Grellan at Thimble Rock. Right off, Trimble decided a Texas Ranger was on the prowl. He didn't want you scoutin' around and locatin' his counterfeit plant."

Hatfield was silent a moment. Before he could speak, McClinton went on, "You

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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interested in what happens to old Jeb and the girl, Hatfield?"

Something in the inflection in the outlaw's voice put a tremor of alarm in Hatfield.

"I'm very much interested in their welfare, McClinton," he said.

The outlaw grinned bleakly. "Figured you would be. Well, you'll have to work fast tonight if you want to see Jeb or the girl alive. Or Bob Orlee either, for that matter."

Hatfield's jaw dropped.

"Why?" he demanded, a sick premonition of disaster sweeping through him.

"Trimble's decided he's been playin' too dangerous a game, holding that couple prisoners for so long. Especially with you on the prowl around Flying T. So he aims to kill the Harrowells tonight—figures they's no point in bothering with them any longer. Bob Orlee, being sweet on the girl, can't be let go when they disappear."

"Disappear?" Hatfield echoed.

McClinton's voice was grim as he replied, "Trimble aims to dump their carcases into that pothole where Grellan heaved you the other night, Hatfield. And by daylight tomorrow, Trimble aims to be on his way to Mexico with me and Baro and his counterfeitin' equipment. He's turning the Flying T over to you, you might say."

CHAPTER XII

Pothole's Last Victim

BOB ORLEE sat alone in the Flying T bunkhouse, playing a game of solitaire.

It was an hour past suppertime.

Something was amiss tonight; something was wrong. It had all started this afternoon when Andy Grellan's cowpany had drifted back to the windmill watering tanks, empty-saddled.

Orlee had been busy digging a cistern when Trimble had returned from Thimble Rock with Andy Grellan's corpse lashed to a packhorse.

It was a little later, after Trimble and his two gun-toting bodyguards had been gathered in the house with Andy's body, that Jacqueline Harrowell had come out to tell Orlee about the supplies she had cached at Thimble Rock earlier today for a Texas Ranger to pick up.

They had had supper as usual, in the main house. Then, shortly after sundown, Baro and McClinton had saddled up and headed north, toward the badlands. And for the first time in many months, Trimble had not allowed Jeb Harrowell to take his nightly ride. That was an ominous development. Right this minute, Orlee believed, Jeb and the girl were locked up in their attic prison. . . .

Orlee slapped down his deck of cards and got to his feet. At this moment he would have given ten years off his life to have got his hands on a gun, but that was impossible. Baro and McClinton never left any firearms lying around the bunkhouse, and Trimble's arsenal was always kept locked up in his private office.

Orlee found himself wondering what Jim Hatfield had done, after Grellan's slaying. So far as Orlee knew, the Texas Ranger had no weapons. Was Hatfield on his way to Langtry to pick up a rifle? If so, he could not make it back to the Flying T before tomorrow morning at the earliest.

The bunkhouse door swung open and Bob Orlee spun around, his nerves jumpy and on edge.

Pecos Pete Trimble stood there in the lantern shine, his Spiller & Burr six-shooter out of leather, the big muzzle directed at his bronc stomper's chest. Behind his beard Trimble's mouth was clamped in a predatory curve.

"You've been honing to get Jackie and her Dad away from the spread ever since you come here, Bob," Trimble rasped out. "Well, tonight all three of you are pullin' stakes."

The tension went out of Orlee in a rush.

"That's good," the puncher said. "You don't have to throw a gun on me to make me drag my wagon."

Trimble laughed harshly.

"You hauled Jim Hatfield out of that pothole yesterday, didn't you, Bob?" the Flying T boss asked. "Don't lie. It couldn't have been anyone else. Hatfield was behind that brush fire, wasn't he? I was a fool not to have figured that out long before now."

Orlee realized, now, that Trimble's plan for releasing him and the Harrowell's from Flying T was predicated on murder, not any sense of justice or mercy.

"A lot of things puzzle me," Trimble admitted. "Such as Grellan's reason for going up to Thimble Rock this morning, and his stepping into a man-trap there. But your Texas Ranger friend is back of everything that's happen in the past two days, and I'm taking no further risks. I am getting out of Texas."

Orlee's tongue felt like a wad of cotton in his mouth. He fully expected Trimble to shoot him as he stood here, when it suited the range boss.

"I don't know—what you're driving at, boss," Orlee said.

Trimble stepped to one side, gesturing with his gun.

"Come on outside and say your goodbys to Jacqueline and her father, Bob."

ORLEE headed past the grim-faced old Confederate veteran, bracing his muscles with the intention of wheeling on Trimble and grappling with him the instant the old man started to follow him out of the bunkhouse.

He did not get the chance. With a chopping motion of his pistol barrel, Trimble clubbed his buckaroo at the base of the skull and dropped Orlee in a limp heap on the bunkhouse steps.

Holstering his gun, Trimble stooped to jack-knife the puncher's insensible shape over his shoulder, displaying a strength that was phenomenal for a man of his years.

Waiting in front of the bunkhouse were four horses, two of them with occupied saddles.

Jacqueline Harrowell and her father were bound and gagged, mute witnesses to Pecos Pete Trimble's perfidy in the bunkhouse.

With bandannas knotted about their mouths, they had had no way of calling an alarm to Orlee. Trimble had forced Jeb Harrowell to tie up his daughter, in the attic cubicle of the ranch house not half an hour ago. Then Trimble had roped up the old artist, and the three of them had gone out to the barn to get the horses.

Despair made Jackie Harrowell slump in saddle as she saw Trimble boost the unconscious Orlee into saddle and tie him in place like a dead man.

Then, stepping into stirrups, Trimble picked up his three trail ropes and spurred his big chestnut stallion.

Leaving Flying T, they headed northward, past Thimble Rock, on into the badlands of the Comanche Hills. Off to the westward, Jebediah Harrowell could see the looming height of Sugarloaf Peak. He knew from the way Trimble was veering away from that landmark that he was not taking them to the cavern where, in years past, Harrowell had set up the illicit printing plant.

The Harrowells wondered where Baro and McClinton were; Trimble had ordered them away from the ranch on some mysterious mission. They believed Trimble's bodyguards were out scouring the badlands for Jim Hatfield; Trimble was working on the assumption that the Texas Ranger had slain Andy Grellan this afternoon.

Following no established trail, Trimble kept going northward, as if using Polaris as his guiding star. They topped a ridge and descended into a rocky, barren pocket in the hills, where a recent fire had burned the weeds and brush black. The charred odor of the smouldering weeds still smudged the air.

Bob Orlee was beginning to writhe in his bonds, as consciousness returned to him. Jackie made pitiful gurgling sounds behind her gag, wanting to communicate with the man she had loved so hopelessly.

Soon Jackie and her father saw the looming chasm of the glacial pothole directly ahead, and knew instinctively that

this was the destination of Trimble's nocturnal jaunt with them. The moonlight, shafting down into the well-shaped hole, added to the sinister aspect of the formation.

Trimble dismounted and hauled a Springfield .45-70 from his saddle boot. As he turned to face his three victims, a noise issuing from a jumble of boulders near the pothole, caused the Flying T boss to whirl about.

Striding out into the moonlight in Trimble's full view came one of Trimble's two bodyguards, Sam McClinton.

McClinton's swart face was grinning, the moon's beams flashing on his tobacco-stained teeth as he headed toward his ranch-boss. At the moment, Trimble did not notice that his gunhawk was holding his arms together at waist level, wrists tied at his sides.

"Sam!" Trimble exclaimed hoarsely. "What are you doing over here? I might have plugged you, startling me this way."

McClinton shook his head. "You always were trigger-happy, boss."

TRIMBLE apparently did not notice the taunting inflexion in his rider's voice. He said waspishly, "Where's Pablo? Did you dynamite the entrance to that prospect hole already?"

Again McClinton shook his head. "Pablo is buzzard bait, boss. You see, we got to your counterfeitin' plant a mite late."

Trimble froze, grounding the butt of his Springfield.

"What do you mean, Sam?"

McClinton laughed softly. "That Texas Ranger was waiting for us at the tunnel. He cashed in Baro's chips for him. I decided my best bet was to turn State's evidence—when you come up for trial as Texas' most-wanted owlhooter, boss."

As he spoke, Sam McClinton lifted up his arms—and for the first time, Pecos Pete Trimble realized that his bodyguard's wrists were fettered with steel handcuffs.

"Where—where's Hatfield now?" Trimble demanded, jerking up his rifle.

From a rocky outcrop a dozen feet behind the Flying T boss came a soft Texas drawl: "Right on the job, Trimble. With your counterfeit printing plates in my pocket—"

Trimble spun about. Off past the three horses with the trussed-up prisoners, the Flying T boss saw the tall shape of the Lone Wolf Ranger silhouetted against the moon.

Hatfield was holding a .30-30 Winchester at hip height as he stepped away from the rocky covert where he had been awaiting Trimble's arrival at The Sheriff's Graveyard.

At his back, Trimble heard Sam McClinton's taunting chuckle, and knew that, for him, the end of the road was at hand. McClinton, in a court of justice, could testify to every detail of the counterfeiting business Trimble had been running for the past eight years, operating with his Flying T cattle ranch as a blind. McClinton knew the names and addresses of the fences who dealt in Trimble's bogus money. McClinton knew the whole history of Trimble's infamous work, using Jeb Harrowell's artistic genius for his own illegal ends, making a slave and worse out of the man who had come to him for aid, a decade ago . . .

All these thoughts went out of focus in Pecos Pete Trimble's head as he saw this agent of retribution stalking toward him in the shape of Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield.

Knowing it was suicide, Trimble jerked up his Springfield, swung the barrel to cover the Lone Wolf.

The rancher's finger was tightening on the trigger when flame spat from the bore of Hatfield's borrowed carbine.

The steel-jacketed missile caught Trimble in the bridge of the nose. The impact of it ripping out the rear of his skull drove Trimble backwards. Dead on his feet, Pecos Pete Trimble collapsed on the brink of the pothole.

Jacqueline Harrowell and her father stared through the drifting powder smoke, aghast with the horror of the scene, yet strangely exalted by the knowledge that they were free.

They saw Sam McClinton step forward

and, getting a nod of permission from Hatfield, plant a bootheel in Pecos Pete Trimble's side and roll the Flying T boss' corpse over the edge of The Sheriff's Graveyard.

The Dinero of Doom had found its last victim.

Seconds later, the meaty crunch of the dead man's drop on the rocks below wafted back out of the pit.

Jim Hatfield laid aside the smoking .30-30 he had taken from Pablo Baro's saddle boot over on Sugarloaf Peak and walked over to untie the bonds of Jeb Harrowell and his daughter. The girl was at his side as he lifted Bob Orlee from saddle.

As the Flying T puncher rocked unsteadily on his feet, he heard the Lone Wolf's whisper:

"You're together now, Bob. For keeps."

And Jim Hatfield would always cherish the memory of Bob Orlee and his sweetheart, in this moment of their reunion. . . .

EARLY the next morning business was slack at the Jersey Lily Saloon. Judge Roy Bean was drowsing behind his pine bar when he heard horses halting at his rack out front.

Through the grimy front window, the porcine bartender saw five riders. One was the tall and handsome Texas Ranger who had visited him a few days back. With him was a blonde girl at the threshold of womanhood, and two riders from the Flying T—Bob Orlee and Sam McClinton, the latter wearing handcuffs. Completing the quintet was an old man who, alone of the group, dismounted and made his way toward the saloon.

Bean was industriously polishing his bar with a grimy rag as the oldster entered the barroom.

"You don't remember me, of course," the old man greeted him courteously.

The self-styled "Law West of the Pecos" shook his head.

"Can't say as I do. What'll it be? Whisky? Beer?"

The old man shook his head. His eyes ranged along the wall, ignoring the gaudy chromo of the British actress for whom the town was named. Instead his gaze settled on a small framed picture, a drypoint etching depicting the defense of the Alamo.

"No whisky—I haven't touched a drop in the ten years since we last met, Mr. Bean," Jebediah Harrowell said gently. "I wish to redeem that Alamo etching yonder. The one you were kind enough to swap a bottle of liquor for."

Judge Roy Bean's jaw dropped. "I'll be hornswoggled," he muttered. "Always wondered if you'd turn up again."

"I will pay you any price you name for that picture," Harrowell said softly. "You see, I want it as a souvenir for my best friend—the Texas Ranger out there on the golden stallion. James Hatfield."

Bean blinked his eyes. "If it's for Hatfield, it's yours for nothing," he said hastily. "How—how is yore little girl?"

Jeb Harrowell's eyes misted over as he accepted the etching from Roy Bean.

"That's she outside, Your Honor," he said. "Come out and let me introduce you to her. She probably won't remember you, of course, after all these years. Besides, she is rather flustered today. She is on her way to the church over in Del Rio—to get married."

Coming in the Next Issue

DEATH RIDES THE STAR ROUTE

Another Exciting Jim Hatfield Novel

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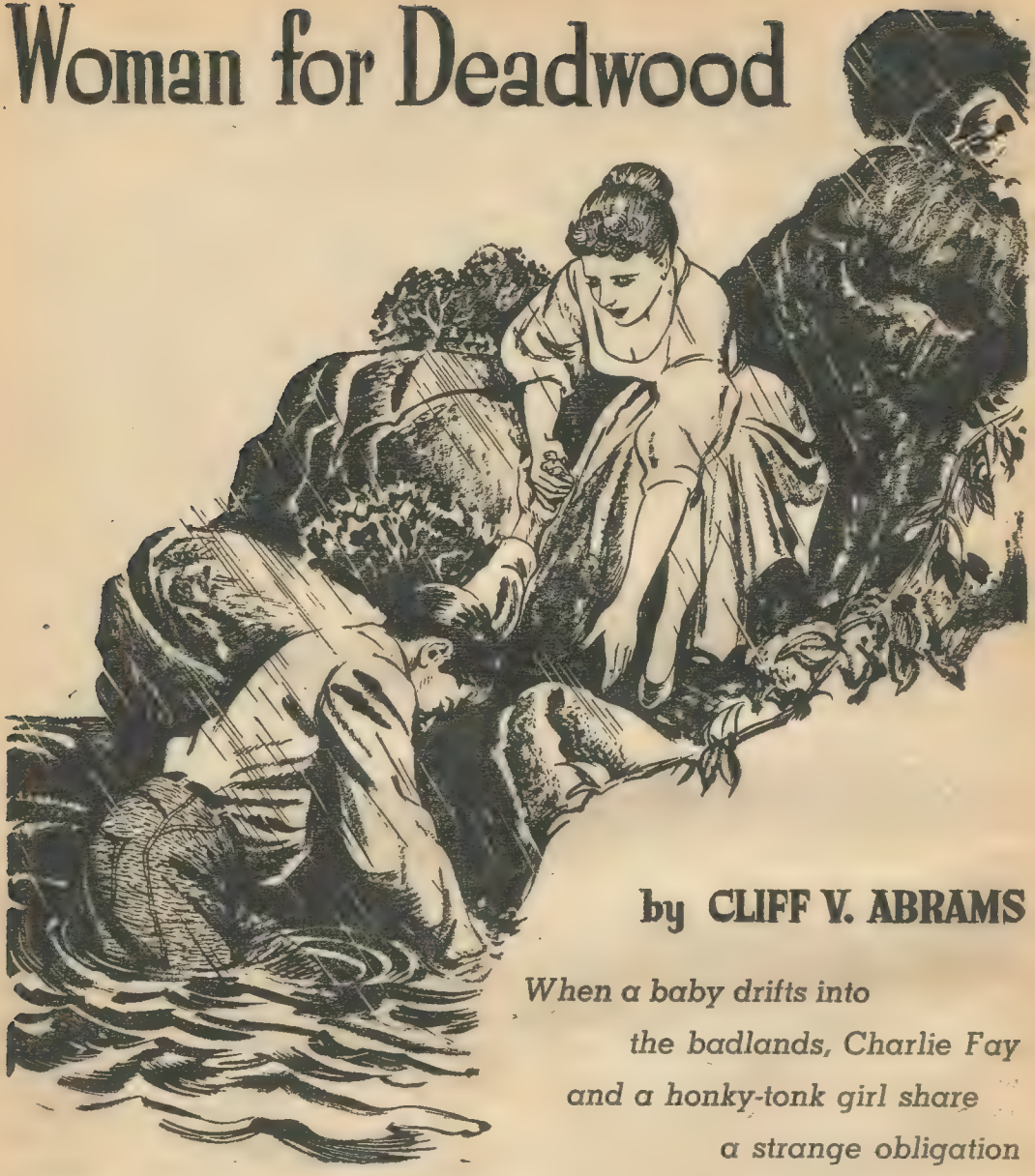

by CLIFF V. ABRAMS

When a baby drifts into the badlands, Charlie Fay and a honky-tonk girl share a strange obligation

IT WAS a raw afternoon. Rain clouds raced over the Dakota Badlands and Charlie Fay's cabin, like blown cannon smoke, hurling forth forked lightning that cracked and banged toward the earth with a continuous rumble of thunder. To the south, the river moaned, level with its banks. Up near the great wall the roar of creeks was like that of a thousand hoofs. It was the sound of nature beating out the music of earth and stormy skies.

Suddenly, above it all, like a note plucked from the wrong string, a human sound came. A cry keened out once, high, shrill with despair, and was gone. Charlie Fay, riding circle in his big pasture, heard it and turned in his saddle. His horse snorted and whirled, as it felt the spurs.

Fay, his yellow slicker billowing, rode for the trail. It was just a hoof-scarred, rutted trace that crossed White River to the southeast, meandered over sage-covered flats, dipped into creeks and skirted badland bluffs. Yet, for all the trail's devious ways, it edged always to the north and west. It still pointed west, even as it climbed the rugged pass through the great wall. For it was a short-cut to the Black Hills.

Fay headed for a spot where the trail went over a steep creek bank. Pulling up at its edge, he threw a discerning glance along the trail and down at the swirling waters. A light rig had passed only a short time before. Narrow wheel marks still fresh in the earth disappeared at the edge of the stream. Even as he looked, Fay knew what had happened.

An unwary traveler had been caught in the sudden rush of water. The violent nature of streams in this walled country was well known to Fay. He swung his horse sharply to the left and raced along the bank, unfastening his catch rope as he rode.

Fifty yards downstream, he found a tangle of top buggy, team and harness piled up on a partly submerged boulder in midstream. Fay lifted his arm to make a throw, but let it drop. The team lay head-down already drowned, the smashed buggy on top of them.

There was no sign of humans and none was found, although Fay searched for a half mile along the shelving bank. He stopped where the creek emptied into the swollen river. Bodies in there would not be recovered until its waters receded. He turned back to the scene of the tragedy.

THE RAIN had stopped, and he was almost there, when a fringe topped surrey rounded a bend and approached the creek. The surrey was occupied by four women and a coarse-faced male driver. It drew up at the creek bank and the driver sat looking across the water. He glanced up as Fay approached, "Think it's safe to tackle?"

Fay shoved back his gray Stetson and eyed him pityingly, "Not by a jugful," he answered flatly.

The fellow scowled and looked again at the water. "When will it go down?"

"Tonight. Maybe not till tomorrow. It's just according to the run-off."

"Did you say maybe we'd have to wait until tomorrow?" A fat, puffy-eyed woman, wearing a flowered bonnet and gray mitts, poked her head out of the surrey to stare up at Fay.

"That's what I figure, ma'am," he answered politely.

"But the girls and I must get to Deadwood gulch," she said fretfully. "Isn't there any other road through this awful country?"

"None. Unless you back track about twenty miles and take the long way around."

"But we wanted to reach the Black Hills by tomorrow night," she wailed.

Fay's lips curled. "You and the girls are just out of luck." He fell to studying the other occupants. There were three of them, crowded together in the back seat. Two long-legged blondes and a husky, brown-eyed girl, or rather woman, for she appeared to be about thirty.

She sat on the outer edge of the seat, studying Fay and winked boldly, when she caught his eye. "Where there's a cowboy, there's a ranch," she said. "And where there's a ranch, there's more cowboys, so I've heard." A grin widened her lips.

"Not in these parts there ain't. There's just me, a log cabin, some cows and this horse." He turned and pointed south with a long chambray-covered arm, "Cabin's that way about a mile. You're welcome to hole-up in it till the creeks go down. There's grub and blankets." He gathered his reins and looked straight at the driver. "You'll find a shed with hay. It's dry and plumb comfortable to bed down in." He reined away.

"Say, you're not running off and leaving us to entertain ourselves alone down there?" the husky girl said plaintively.

"I have riding to do," he told her. "Plenty of it. The range is full of bogs."

"I thought cowboys were crazy to have

ladies come. That they'd drop everything—"

"Not this cowboy. Now, you people must excuse me!" He rode away.

A voice trailed after him, "Now, how do you like that?"

Fay didn't glance around. He knew the type of "ladies" in the rig. Honky-tonk women and worse. An expression that was almost a grimace of pain slid for a moment across his narrow chiseled face. Then it was gone. But his blue eyes held a hurt, far away expression, as they looked over the wet land.

Suddenly, a voice came at him again, "Hey, cowboy!" The urgency of the call made him turn. The husky girl had stepped from the surrey and was beckoning excitedly.

He rode back, scowling, "What now?"

"Do you have a baby hid around here?"

"What!!"

"It's down that way. It began crying a moment ago," she pointed downstream. Fay spun his horse and plunged away.

Twenty yards downstream, he pulled up and pered over the bank. A child, pinned in its blue blanket, lay face-down at the edge of the water. A thorned bush caught in the blanket was all that kept it from drifting away. Above it a pitiful little depression in the mud was evidence that it had been flung there. A shelf under an overhang had kept Fay from seeing it before.

FAY stepped swiftly from the saddle. Boot heels digging into the bank, he went down. As he gently unhooked the blanket and lifted the baby, he thought of the lone cry coming through the storm. In his mind, he could see a mother lifting herself in the rig, as it was swept from under her, and flinging her baby desperately toward the shore. Perhaps she had seen it land safely, as the water closed over her. Perhaps not . . .

"Now, how the devil did that get there?" The feminine party from the surrey met Fay at the top of the bank.

"There was an accident here," Fay answered coldly.

A little gasp brought Fay's eyes to one of the girls, "Why, Mrs. Horn, that's little Davey, the Johnson baby! They pulled ahead of us, you know."

The fat woman stared at the bundle in Fay's arms. "That's its new blanket, all right. Mrs. Johnson bought it at Wheeler." Her puffy eyes searched Fay's face, "Land of Goshen! The kid's mother and dad—they ain't—"

Fay nodded. "And no trace of them." He asked huskily: "Who were they? Where did they come from?"

"A young preacher and his wife. We caught up with them at Yankton. They came along with us. That is—" She coughed slightly, "they had their own team and camp, of course. But— Say, our driver might know something." She turned, "Yo-ho, Yankton! Will you come here a minute?"

She turned back to Fay, "We call him Yankton because he came from there. I hired him to drive us out west. He's been through here several times. A very capable man."

"So I gathered," Fay remarked, thinking of the man's indecision at the stream.

Yankton came up, and Mrs. Horn addressed him rapidly, "Mr. Yankton, do you know where Reverend Johnson came from? He and his wife seemed to prefer your company to ours. At least you folks chatted a lot."

Yankton rubbed his chin. "Well, I reckon we did all right. The Johnsons hailed from down East. He was an orphan. So was his wife. Mentioned it this side of Wheeler, just before the ruckus."

Fay looked at him questioningly, but Mrs. Horn enlightened him quickly. "Molly here," she nudged the dark-haired girl, "got to jollying around the parson. Just in fun, you know. Him and his wife got miffed and pushed on ahead. That was up on the prairies just south of this here place."

Fay swung to Molly. "Then it's your fault they were ahead." He turned and snapped at Yankton. "Why did you let him go ahead? That wasn't too smart. You've been through here before. You

should have known he was a greenhorn."

The fellow looked startled for a moment, swallowed hard, "I don't know what you're drivin' at."

"Just this. A man and his wife—a good man and his woman—have been drowned, because they wouldn't travel with your kind. The kind of women you're transporting. They've left a helpless baby behind, with no place on God's green earth for it to be taken care of, maybe for days. No grub, no nothin'. Not even a change of pants." He turned and glared at the others. "Do any of you *ladies* know anything about babies? What they need?"

The girl Molly blushed, "I—I was a doctor's assistant once; I've taken care of them," she whispered.

"Then take care of this one." He shoved the bundle at her. "Put it in the rig. Get it down to the house and into something dry. I'll round up a cow." He swung into the saddle and loped away.

Behind him, one of the girls complained loudly, "What a grouch! Gol-ly! 'You take it!' he says and shoves it out. Just like that. 'You do this. You do that,' he says and rides off. That guy don't ask. He just orders!"

It was a proddy, long-horned dodging animal with calf galloping clumsily at her side, that Fay brought back an hour later. He hazed her into a pole corral.

Entering the house, Fay took a tin lard pail from a shelf. He glanced around the room. The baby made a tiny mound under the blanket on the bunk. Its clothing was hung over chairs to dry. A wail arose from the bunk. Fay hooked a thumb toward a corner cupboard. "You will find a bottle in there; rig it up!" he ordered and went out.

At the corral, Yankton, a limp hand-rolled cigarette in his mouth, hung over the top rail. Inside, the cow, with calf tagging at her heels, restlessly sniffed at the bars and pawed the earth. "You don't aim to milk that thing?" Yankton said doubtfully.

Fay spit the cigarette from his lips. "Man, you're crazy! She'll hook your guts out!"

Fay answered by lifting an old soft-twisted rope from a nail. He tossed it over the bars. Then stepping to his saddle, he unstrapped his throw-rope. Entering the corral, he shook out a loop and fired. Instantly the cow charged.

Fay threw a hitch over a snubbing post and stepped aside just in time. The cow hit the rope's end with a jolt that shook the ground. She went to her knees and came up bellowing. Fay's work-hardened hands blurred as he took up the slack.

He had to get her in close, with the wicked horns against the snubbing post. That was the only way. Tie the head short and fast, then go for the hoofs with the other rope. A flint-hard hind hoof could slash a man wide open.

STILL struggling with the cow's fighting head, Fay was aware of Yankton slipping inside the corral. "Get back there!" he yelled, but Yankton ignored him. He had the other rope in his hands. With a deft motion, he sent out its loop.

Like a live thing, it skimmed the ground and curled to snare a hind foot. Yankton made a quick run and the leg was straight back. "Thanks, I didn't figure on help," Fay panted.

Yankton's coarse face twisted into a grin, "I handled a rope down in Texas. That was long before I started hauling ladies in the Dakotas."

Fay nodded, got his lard pail and began milking. It was an almost impossible feat. There is no drier mother on earth than a range cow, when she wants to be. It was only after Fay had caught the calf and jammed its bawling nose into her flank that she consented to give down.

At last, Fay held up his bucket and eyed it, "'Nough for three feeds, I'd think," he said.

"The kid ought to be grateful," Yankton remarked. "That was milking the hard way."

Fay grinned. "It'll be easier after awhile." Yankton looked skeptical and Fay explained: "You see, I'll keep the calf corraled and let the mammy go. She'll hang around, hoping to get to her

calf. But I'll let her in only at milking time. And, I'll be right there to help the calf do his job. I've seen it done. It's simple once the cow gets the idea."

"Well, I never hankered after a milkmaid's job—even the gentle kind," Yankton said. But he helped turn the cow out, before wandering off toward the barn.

Back at the house, Fay set his bucket on the table. He looked at the woman working across from him. She took a flat, crooked-necked bottle from a pan of water. She placed it on the table along with a rubber tube and child's nipple. "It was awfully dusty. It must have lain in that cupboard a long time." Her brown eyes studied him.

His lips came shut. "Not so long." He pointed to a shelf. "There's syrup in that jug to sweeten the milk. I'll have to ride again. There are a lot of bogs to examine before dark."

The woman in the door waved the bottle, as Fay rode past. "Do you have other things to go with this? Diapers and such? He sure needs one."

"There's just the bottle," he answered and disappeared into the badlands.

Darkness had come before Fay returned. He paused in the barn door, listening to the deep breathing of the man asleep inside, shoved hay to his tired horse and silently left. Going to the corral, he mounted the top rail and sat staring into the moonlight night.

"Cowboy, aren't you lonesome up there?"

Fay looked down. He saw her smiling up at him from the shadows. "I'm not complaining," he said gruffly.

She laughed mockingly and climbed the bars to sit beside him. "Now, isn't this better?"

"I wouldn't know," he answered without warmth.

She laughed again. "I'm curious about you. You act so hard-boiled. And yet . . ."

"What if I am?"

"Golly, I don't know. Only—" He was conscious of her heavy perfume, as she leaned close. "A gal could go for a man like you. She really could. Tall, sunburned, handsome as the devil and—"

"Shut up!"

"Well, you didn't need to slap my face!"

"I don't know as I did."

"You might just as well have. Gol-ly! A girl tries to be friendly, and she gets this!" She jerked angrily aside and slid to the ground, "Good night!"

"Wait!" His boots thudded down beside her. "Look. You were curious about me. Well, come on!" He caught her by the arm and guided her toward a low butte rising east of his cabin.

"Where you taking me?" she exclaimed, more excitement than alarm in her voice.

THE man's voice was harsh. "You'll see. Now pick up those dainty feet and put them down careful. This trail is slippery. You might fall flat on your face," he warned roughly.

"Why, there's nothing here. Just a little bush and a lot of wet grass. Oh-h!" Her breath caught, "T—there's a grave here! You've brought me to a grave!"

"Yes, a grave. Take a good look, lady. It's a baby's grave." His face was granite hard in the moonlight.

"How did it get here," she said weakly.

"It got here because its mother was a tramp."

"Gol-ly!"

"Golly nothing! Its mother was busy dancing in saloons and playing around with men, while her baby lay choking to death with pneumonia."

"Oh, gol-ly!"

"Can't you think of anything else to say besides that?" Fay asked hoarsely.

"Oh, gol— I mean—I don't know. You scare me! Your face looks so awful. And when you talk—" She shuddered.

"I'm sorry. But I probably look just like I feel."

Her hand stole out, as though to touch his, but fell limply to her side, "That was its bottle I washed today. Wasn't it?"

He nodded. "It was the only thing left. What few clothes he had, I gave away a long time ago. Somehow, the bottle was missed. I'm glad now. That tike at the house will have that much at least."

"He's enjoying it, too," she said quickly, "And the pants we ripped for him." She stopped, then added, "Look. Girls like us aren't all completely black. Even if your wife was. Where did you meet a thing like her, anyway?"

"In a saloon. She was a sweet acting little person. Wanted a chance at a different life." Fay drew a long breath. "She had that chance, but it didn't last. She didn't give *that*" his fingers cracked loudly, "for me or her baby, when the cards were down."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know. All I know is that I rode home one night in the dead of winter. The fire was out and there was a note that she had run off with a drummer, who had holed-up at my place until a storm blew over. The note ended, saying that she never wanted to see me or the baby again."

"You mean she went away and left him alone!" Molly asked incredulously.

"Yes. Little Sammy—he wasn't quite two—was standing in the middle of the floor in his bare feet, crying with the cold. He tried to tell me, mamma had put him to bed and he was to stay there until Daddy got home. But—" a great shuddering sob shook the man's shoulders, "But Baby got scared— He got sick the next day. Come! Let's go back to the house."

She followed silently. Near the house, she laid a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry—awfully sorry!" she said.

"Thanks," he said gruffly. "Better get to bed now. Tomorrow will be a long day." She looked at him questioningly and he added, "I'm riding at daylight." He nodded toward the river. "It's falling fast. Their bodies will have lodged somewhere. I'll bury them near him. It won't be so lonely out there, after this," he ended almost to himself.

"C-can I be of help?" she asked hesitatingly.

He looked at her quickly. "Why, you and the women could watch the kid. Your driver can help me with everything else."

"We'll do that. And then, when everything's ready—we'll bring him out. They would like that. They would, wouldn't they?" A strange note, as though she felt she hardly dare ask, was in her voice.

He nodded silently and took her hand from his arm, "You better hike in now. The kid's fussing. I don't hear any of the rest seeing to him."

NEXT DAY, at noon, they found the bodies. Reverend Johnson and his wife lay side-by-side in a shallow pool, below a sharp bend in the river. They wrapped them in blankets and at sunset lowered them into a single grave. Then, as he and Yankton again took up their spades, Charlie Fay looked over at the women. "Someone should say something," he said. "How about you, Mrs. Horn?"

The big woman hesitated. Then, bringing her folded hands to her big bosom, she bowed her head. "Gawd," she said, "the souls of two Shepherds are coming home. They worked hard, Gawd. Too hard. Please, give them rest."

The words seemed to lift among the darkening buttes and linger along their ragged crests. Then only the sound of spades against gravel and shale was heard. After a time, that too, was stilled. A night bird came, hovered for a moment over the little group standing about the grave, then drifted on. Silence and night closed in on the Badlands and the things that they held.

The following morning came with clear, untroubled skies, and a soft wind that rippled the grass of the salt flats. Mrs. Horn smiled, as she looked over the plains. "Well, girls, let's get started," she announced briskly. Her words were greeted with squeals of excitement. Mrs. Horn turned to Fay: "I've been wondering about this baby. You have someone in mind, of course."

"I have. Tim O'Shea and his wife Mary. They're traders and due here in a couple of days."

"Splendid!" she gushed, in evident relief. "I suppose we could have taken him ourselves. I'd thought of it. But as it is now, why, it's just splendid. Oh, Mr. Yankton, help us with the grips," she added, in al-

most the same breath.

While the surrey was being loaded, Molly edged over to where Fay stood watching. "You're sure you'll be all right with him until those people come?"

"Quite all right," he answered.

She lingered. "He had cramps for a time this morning and cried. Maybe—"

"Just a change of milk," Fay told her.

"Yes. I suppose it was that. Only I wish—" she turned suddenly and took her place in the surrey. She lifted her hand. "So long, cowboy. Look me up in the Black Hills, if you have time." Her smile was mocking.

Fay watched them go, then stepped inside. The cabin was quiet now. Only the lingering odor of perfume remained. Fay opened the window wide and breathed deeply of the outside air. He turned to the sleeping baby.

Its hands lay above the covers. Just beyond was the empty bottle. Fay gently picked up one of the hands. It felt soft and small in his. He started to lay the hand back, but the tiny fingers closed on his thumb. Fay let it rest. A smile flitted across the baby's face, as though even in sleep he knew someone was near. So Fay sat, his thumb trapped in the baby's hand. It had been a long time—

Down at the corral, the long-horned cow, feeding quietly on the curled grass, lifted her head and mooed suddenly. It was only a reassuring call to her calf locked in the corral. It aroused Fay. He glanced at the battered clock on a shelf.

Hours had passed. He rose, picked up the bottle, washed it and set milk to warm. Davey would be awake soon and hungry. Although he hurried, Fay barely had the bottle ready in time. He propped it on a pillow and placed the nipple in the baby's mouth.

The lips closed eagerly and the milk fairly gurgled in the leader. "You're sure one hungry feller," Fay said and grinned.

A HIGH wind, carrying the smell of more rain, blew in from the southeast, when Fay went down to the corral that evening. It threatened to snatch the swinging gate from his hand, as he closed it behind the cow. It whipped the rope out of control the moment he threw, and sent his hat spinning. Fay worked up wind and roped from there.

Fay had hung his brimming bucket on a nail and was coiling his rope to put it away when the corral gate, which had been rattling steadily in the wind, suddenly slammed back, almost tearing loose from its leather hinges and sending the locking pin flying. He rushed to close it, but the cow was quicker. She darted through and was gone, her calf leaping beside her.

Hurriedly, Fay saddled and gave chase. To have her get entirely away with the calf might mean hours of hunting. She was disappearing into the badlands before he overtook her. He made one try for the calf with his rope and missed. So he began hazing them in. They drove fairly easy and were almost to the corral gate when the cow made one more dash. She lined out for the river.

Hard on her heels, Fay plunged over a low bank and cut short to the left in an attempt to head her. In the murky shadows, he didn't see the creeper angling down from the bank. Big as a woman's wrist, strong as a lariat, it caught the horse just below his knees and threw him hard. . . . Fay landed on his head and shoulders twenty feet ahead of where the horse fell.

Night had come and rain striking him in the face was the next thing that Fay knew. He tried to sit up, but his back felt like it was nailed to the earth. He heard a whispering sound and knew the rising river was near.

He drew up his knees and tried to edge away from it. The effort made his ears ring and brought a groan from his lips, but he did manage to roll to his stomach. Gasping and sick, he let his head sink and waited for the pain to pass. Lightning ripped across the sky. Its glare lit up the entire river.

Fay saw the creeper where his horse had gone down, but the animal was nowhere in sight. It evidently had gotten

to its feet and wandered up over the bank. That bank ran steeply all along the river. Even as he saw it momentarily, Fay realized he was trapped. There was just one slim chance.

That was to drag himself to the slope, dig fingers into the mud, hope that he was in an eddy and let the rising waters help lift his tortured body to the top. As he inched forward, he thought of the baby in his bunk. Its feet, hands and noises were like those of his own boy. Sammy had smiled the same way and hung onto your finger the same way.

It could almost be Sammy up there now. With no light, no one to make him one, and his only food still hanging on a nail in a rain-soaked corral. It might be days before Tim and Mary O'Shea came by now. Fay groaned at the thought. The sound died in his throat, for he'd felt the first sweep of the water over his body.

The river of the Badlands lifted swiftly when it rose. The deep creeks leading down from the great wall took care of that. In three minutes Fay was able to reach another hand-hold on the bank. It was then that he felt the first surge of real terror.

The water along here wasn't slow, but a current—one that almost tore him loose when he let go with one hand. It would run stronger, as the river rose. He made a swift grab once more and felt his hands close on a clump of wild sage. He could smell the pungent odor, oven through the driving rain.

He clutched it. He'd hang on to it, as long as the roots stayed in the ground. But even as the resolution passed through his mind, he felt the plant slowly giving way. This was the finish. He could help himself no more.

"So long, cowboy!" Again he heard her flippant laugh, saw the careless wave of her hand, as she drove off. He was just another man, the same as he'd been in the life of another. She didn't care. Neither did he for that matter. "Cowboy!" Funny how clear a voice could sound in one's imagination. "Cowboy!" The lightning glared overhead. Something tugged at his hands. Just the cold, wetness of the river. He closed his eyes and let it carry him away. . . .

SOOTHING warmth was the next sensation that stole through Fay. His back was stiff and sore, but the shooting pain was gone. He felt almost contented, except for a strange brightness that hurt his eyes. He lifted his hand to brush it away and found himself looking at the log beams of a cabin roof.

He turned his head and saw sunlight streaming through a window. He was in his own bunk. Across the room, on the table, Davey laughed and cooed, while Molly bathed him. "How did you get here?" Fay's voice sounded strange in his own ears.

Molly jumped. "You've come out of it at last!" She flung a blanket around the dripping child and hurried to Fay's bed. "I—I thought you'd never awaken!" There was a little tremor in her voice.

He lay watching her for a time, his mind feeling empty and strange. "You haven't answered my question," he said at last.

She looked down at the child in her arms. "I walked. I—I was afraid he'd be sick. I—I couldn't get him off my mind. Even though you seemed to feel so—so efficient—" Her words trailed off.

"Then it *was* your voice I heard last night! Your *real* voice!"

"It was two nights ago. And a day and a half," she corrected. "It's almost noon now."

He looked at her in amazement. "I've lain here that long!"

"You have. You've been suffering from shock. I've seen it before. And your poor back! It's so swollen and blue. You must have got it hurt terribly, cowboy."

"I reckon I did. But—it ain't busted, is it?"

"No. Just twisted, sprained and bruised," she assured him.

He eyed her. "That's right. You said you were a doctor's assistant at one time. You know about such things."

"I wish I knew more." She rocked the

baby in her arms. "It'll be at least a week before you can leave that bed."

"B-but I-I can't! I don't dare! Not that long!"

She looked at him calmly. "Why not? Those people you spoke of came last night. They're doing the chores now."

Fay lay back. He felt relaxed, but she looked spent and drawn. There were circles under her eyes. Mentally, he began sorting the passage of time. "You must have walked a long way," he said aloud.

"Well, I got pretty tired," she admitted meekly.

"But how did you find me? It was night and raining."

"The house was dark and baby was crying. I knew something was wrong. Then I saw your horse by the river. The lightning was terrible bright that night. Wasn't it?" she ended.

He wanted to answer. To say something—to thank her, but words wouldn't come. He turned his face and gazed out the window. Tim and Mary O'Shea moved about the corrals. They were turning out a long-horned cow. The same one he'd tried to break. O'Shea must have located her through someone's description, Molly's. No one else knew.

And he had believed that a woman like her wouldn't notice anything about a ranch. Come to think of it, there were lots of things that he'd believed, that could be wrong. He looked at her again, as though seeing her for the first time.

She moved away, fussing with the baby. She spoke over her shoulder. "The O'Sheas are coming now."

A bearded, red-headed man stepped in. Behind him was a tall, blue-eyed woman, carrying a bucket of milk. "Ah," she exclaimed, as her eyes lighted on Fay, "the dear lad has come out of it, at last." She set the bucket on the table and rushed to him. "And how're you feelin', lad?"

"Fine, Mary O'Shea. How's trading business?"

"'Tis at a standstill at present. And let it stay there." She leaned close, her eyes eager. "The lass has told me all about the babe. And that you kind of planned to place it in old Mary's care—seein' it has no mother. Poor thing!"

"I did—but I'm not so sure now," Fay answered. He lay back and closed his eyes wearily. "I'll have to sleep on it. But you won't be too disappointed, will you, Mary O'Shea?"

"I won't, Charlie Fay. It would have been nice to have him. But—" She turned away, smiling softly.

She understood—and wasn't disappointed, for as Fay slept, his hand had stolen out and taken the hand of the other woman who had come to stand beside him. On that woman's lips was the old, half-mocking smile. But in her eyes was a new light. Soft and warm, clean as the sunlight over the Badlands.

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The MacTHANE of SHAMAN'S ARROYO

A giant blacksmith hammers out vengeance for a killer gang!

by LIONEL E. I. DAY

SILVER JACK BINEY was pretty smart, even if he was our sheriff and died before his time. He said, among the hundred other things that folks still jaw around, that the most peculiar thing about a man is what he is. Silver Jack said that the funniest thing about a merchant is that he likes to trade, a gambler likes to gamble and a killer likes to kill. He said, too, that if a man is good at his calling, he is a good man.

Silver Jack was right, sure as shooting, sure as death. The MacThane was a smithy because he liked to smith. He was a rattling good smith, too. That was reason enough for folks to call him "The" MacThane. But there were other, bigger reasons. Out of the fierce loyalty of his

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Scot nature there grew a legend which the men of our town still tell their kids. You can believe it or not, as you wish, but some folks claim that you can still hear the MacThane's anvil ringing through the dark of a night whenever men like Yavapai Ben and his devilish companions come to town.

This might be a story about Silver Jack alone or the MacThane alone, but it isn't. It is a story about the two together, because they couldn't be parted while they lived, and they can't be parted in death. They came West together on the same bucking seat of the same high-sided Conestoga. They lived the best part of their lives together, bound with an unbreakable bond of mutual respect and understanding between them. But they didn't die together, and that is why there is a story to tell.

Silver Jack was smart, but there were men he met while he lived who were smarter. They were smarter in the way that a trapped fox or a badger in a barrel is smarter than his scot-free brothers. They were deadly-smart. Silver Jack was too much of a tolerant man to cope with their weasel cunning.

When Yavapai Ben and his pack of murder-mean desperadoes rode in on the lashing tail of a dust blow that had been clawing the Arroyo for three unholy days, they came like the Horsemen of the Apocalypse, riding out of the gloom of hell. They were four evil men on four bleeding, brush-scarred horses, riding through the swirling yellow fog of dust.

Silver Jack saw them as they passed the sheriff's office and knew them instantly for what they were. He noted the set of their guns, the way each man turned his head furtively as though expecting to be shot at. The silver-haired, silver-mustached sheriff saw them as four bad men who would some day grace a gallows if fate let them live so long.

THE MacThane saw them when they passed the door of his smithy. He paused in his work long enough to notice that their horses were badly in need of shoes, that one had a broken cinch ring and another a bent bit shank.

It was typical of Yavapai Ben and his crew that they left their drooping, thirsty horses to huddle tails to the wind while they washed the dust from their own throats at Donovan's saloon. What the MacThane did was just as typical. He laid down his sledge and let his iron grow cold while he went out into the inferno of dust and watered the horses, one by one, at the livery stable trough.

Silver Jack paused on his way into the saloon.

"You've done a kindness, Douglas," he shouted above the howling wind.

The MacThane crashed his huge right fist into his palm and roared.

"They're unfeeling brutes, leaving the beasties suffer while they carouse. You'd better beware of such men, Jock."

"Stick to your forge and leave sheriffing to me!" Silver Jack said with a chuckle.

The MacThane went back to his work, but his mind was uneasy. As the might of his arms forged glowing metal into useful shapes, he couldn't help but think how desolate life would be without Silver Jack. He thought of their years together, of the hardships they had faced, of how Silver Jack had taken to enforcing the law not because he liked the work, but because, in that wild time, no other man was willing.

He thought, too, of Yavapai Ben and his kind—the human drones whose idleness led them into deviltry. The MacThane believed that a man's mission on earth was useful work, that there would be time enough in eternity for resting. Like the strong men of all eras, his philosophy was simple because he had no fears. He was a smith, through and through, even to his hair which was the color of golden-hot metal, and the hue of his eyes was the blue of well-tempered gun steel. Yet he was no automaton, the MacThane. The warmth of his heart and his dry Scottish humor made him the best loved man in our town.

That evening, when Silver Jack came to the MacThane's house for their nightly game of checkers, he did not lay his guns aside as usual. In answer to the question in the Scot's blue eyes, he spoke softly.

"Stacey just rode in from down Arroyo. Says he found Placer Sam Willoughby murdered in his cabin. The killers took every ounce of dust the old man had, then slit his throat with a skinning knife."

MacThane's rugged face turned stern as judgment in the yellow lamplight. He let his hand fall on the checker board, scattering the pieces.

"The murderers!" he muttered.

"The storm has covered the killers' sign," Silver Jack went on as he rearranged the board. "There's no proof, and they know it."

"Proof!" MacThane snorted. "What more d'ye need, mon? No one of *us* would do such a bloody thing."

"I'm a sheriff, and I need proof. I'll get it, too."

"How, Jock?"

Silver Jack sighed thoughtfully and crowned a black king.

"If I know their kind, and I do, they won't be happy unless they're gambling. If I know Donovan's games, which I do, they'll lose. Now if they pay off in dust, I'll have my proof, because Sam's diggings are the only place in a hundred miles where a man could get placer gold and plenty of it."

"But they're four, and you're one, Jock. Ye'll be needing help."

"Play and keep shut, you muscle-bound Scot," Silver Jack said with a grin. "What I need most is your help in killing time. They'll be well-liquored in another hour, and unless I'm wrong they'll be gambling their filthy shirts away. Play, Douglas!"

"They'll no escape, Jock?" MacThane asked anxiously.

"Not while the dust keeps blowing. They wouldn't get twenty miles."

"Then I'll play, and no doubt I'll beat you as usual."

They played for an hour to a six-game draw, and though they usually played ten rounds, Silver Jack pushed away from the table. He looked at his watch.

"It's time I was going. They'll be liquored up by now."

MacThane stood hurriedly and reached for his cap. "I could do with a wee drop, myself," he said.

"No, Douglas. This is my job just as yours is smithing."

The Scot snorted noisily.

"Whoosh, now!" he said. "If you were as good a man at your job as I am at mine, I wouldn't worry. Let's go."

Yavapai Ben and his dark-skinned breed consorts were liquor-ugly and inflamed with the bad fortune they were having at cards when the MacThane and Silver Jack came in. The saloon was crowded with men waiting out the storm. The floor was thick with powdery dust so that when a man walked he was enveloped knee-high in a cloud of it. There was white dust on the bartop, and on the brass lanterns that swung from the ceiling beams.

DUST trickled into every fold of clothing and clung to sweaty skin like a plague of the itch. Tempers were short because of it, and men drank incessantly to wash their raw throats clean. To top all was the stench of the place, for the windows were shut tight against the storm. It smelled, as the MacThane remarked to Silver Jack when the two bellied up to the bar, like a whisky barrel full of unwashed socks.

Silver Jack nursed his drink and watched the pile of chips in front of Yavapai Ben shrink, watched the house dealer's fingers tremble a little each time he spun the cards across the table. Yavapai Ben was chunky as a fattened beef. The flush of Indian red on his features had deepened to a livid, sweaty hue. His mashed nose and crow-black hair which dropped in long, straight braids from behind each ear, gave him the appearance of a fat, predatory vulture.

The beady Apache eyes of his men followed his every move as hawk nestlings watch their mother, waiting for a carrion morsel to be crammed down their maws. They were not handsome, as breeds often are, but only evil. The dark and the light blood that mingled in their veins was the murkiest dregs of two great racial pools. They were bad, not because of the color of their skins, but because they lacked souls.

"I do not like the look of them," Mac-

Thane whispered. "And they care not a hoot whether you're here or gone."

"They know the storm has covered their sign," Silver Jack explained. "They're nervy scoundrels, and the sooner they're jugged the better—if they're the ones."

"Can ye doubt it, man?"

Silver Jack shook his head. It was easy to imagine blood on their swarthy hands.

A few minutes later an oath cracked from Yavapai Ben's lips. The saloon grew still, and you could hear the howl of the wind and the swish of sand in the eaves outside. Yavapai Ben came to his feet and glowered down at Donovan's white-faced dealer. His three outriders sat tense, thumbs hooked in their beaded cartridge belts. Yavapai Ben's voice had in it the spine-tingling yelp of the Apache war cry.

"Our dust, all of it, against your whole stinking bank!" he yelled. "We cut once with a new deck. High card takes all."

The dealer's face was ghastly in the green glow of his eye shade. His glance flickered to where old man Donovan stood. Donovan, who owned the saloon, raised a finger in assent. Yavapai Ben dug a rawhide poke from inside his shirt and plunked it down.

"This is it!" Silver Jack whispered to the Scot. "They're gambling with a dead man's dust!"

The dealer broke the seal on a fresh deck. Yavapai Ben snatched it from his hands, riffled the cards a few times, then slammed the deck down.

"Cut!" he snarled.

The dealer's supple white fingers reached out and hesitated over the pack. Tension became a tangible, electrifying thing in the crowded saloon. Men shrank away from the table or hunched deep in their chairs. Some of them hurried out the door, preferring the lash of gale-driven dust to the eminent risk of lead.

Silver Jack moved in easily with the MacThane not far behind. With a jerky, nervous gesture, the dealer cut. Yavapai Ben's breath hissed in his teeth when he saw the card. No one doubted, from the curdling rage that contorted his face, that Donovan's dealer had drawn an ace.

Yavapai Ben's chunky paws dropped toward his guns, then hesitated. He seemed for the first time to become aware of the sheriff's presence. Silver Jack chose that moment to speak.

"Keep 'em high, Ben. You're under arrest!"

Ben whirled, his red-shot eyes narrow. He held his hands stiffly away from his sides.

"What for?" he growled.

"Murder," Silver Jack told him as he drew a gun. "You slit Placer Sam's throat and stole his dust."

"That's a lie!" Yavapai Ben snarled. "You're in on this crooked game, you two-bit lawman!"

Silver Jack smiled thinly.

"I'll talk to Donovan about his games later. Right now there's murder on my mind. Are you coming peaceful?"

Yavapai Ben hesitated, his eyes sweeping the room. His three long-riders sat rigid in their seats. Then Ben seemed to make up his mind. He raised his hands high but close to his ears.

"It's a dirty frame, but I'll come," he snarled.

"Drop your guns and kick 'em over here," Silver Jack ordered.

Ben obeyed, keeping his movements slow and cautious. First one gun, then the other hit the sawdust. He toed them over to Silver Jack.

"The rest of you do the same," Jack said.

FOR one tiny instant his glance strayed from the big breed's face. But that was time enough. Ben's hand darted to the back of his neck, then flipped toward the sheriff. The swish of the flying knife was a faint echo of the howling wind outside. The blade took Silver Jack in the base of his chest.

He knelt in the dust, retched, then pitched forward on his face.

A sigh went through the room. No one moved except the breeds, who leaped to their leader's side with guns drawn. MacThane stood rigid, his unbelieving eyes on Silver Jack's body. A moment ago the man had breathed, had moved and talked. Now he lay in pooling blood—not a man

any more, but a charnel thing, fit only for the grave.

The Scot dropped to his knees by the dead man's side. The sound that poured from his throat had in it the trumpeting anguish of a wounded moose. It struck a chill into the hearts of those who heard it.

Yavapai Ben snatched up his guns and cowered back. He understood the meaning of the cry. He knew that there was no longer room enough under the same sun for himself and the terrible Scot. Yet, knowing this, he dared not kill the MacThane. So Yavapai Ben bolted like a bushed deer, his three dark imps of Hades crowding his heels.

There was not a man in the saloon who dared follow, for some say that Satan himself took a hand in things then. The instant Yavapai Ben stepped out into the night, the gale wind dwindled to a sullen whisper.

When the sound of their galloping horses had died away, a few of the more daring ranchers tried to follow, but the storm lashed up in their faces and drove them back again. The devil was riding the wind that night.

Yavapai Ben and his murderous crew were long gone when the MacThane rose to his feet, and with his eyes still on Silver Jack's body, swore in a terrible, choked voice.

"They'll not live to see another sunset, Jock! I promise it!"

Yet through all the dark night hours, the MacThane could do nothing but sit in his smithy and beat his huge fists on the unfeeling iron of his anvil. There was mockery in the sand that hissed through the open door and settled like snow on his head and shoulders. Each passing minute saw Ben and his bunch getting further away, while MacThane did nothing to stop them. His vow seemed only an empty boast.

As the sand storm dwindled toward dawn, the storm in MacThane's breast waxed till he was half mad with the pain of it. How could the MacThane avenge such a crime? Silver Jack himself had said that a man is what he is. The MacThane was only a smithy while Ben and his bunch were professional killers. They were as expert in their infamous calling as MacThane was in his peaceful one. Yavapai Ben, no doubt, could never have smithed a stroke if his worthless life depended upon it. By the same token, MacThane couldn't wield firearms.

He looked down at his huge hands with loathing. They were capable hands for honest work—muscular, broad and thick in the fingers.

"But what good are you now, when I need you most?" he choked. "You cannot avenge the death of a friend, you useless things!"

The pistol was not for the mighty hands of the MacThane, nor was the knife. Yet, with the coming of dawn, one thing was clear to the grief-stricken Scot—he could never smith another stroke until Silver Jack was avenged. And smithing was the MacThane's whole life. Without it, he was no good on earth.

As MacThane reached this conclusion, a blood-red shaft of dawn sunlight thrust through the murk of circling dust in the smithy. It struck through the dust, shining on the far wall where hung a coiled lariat, and glowed brightly down upon a sledge that leaned in a rack and a coil of heavy iron trace-chain.

SLOWLY, the MacThane rose to his feet. Sunlight bathed the great bulk of him from head to toe. He was a fearsome figure, like the Avenging Angel himself. The timbers of the smithy shuddered as MacThane thundered.

"Guns! Guns! I'll have no need of guns!"

A short time later, MacThane rode out of town on the back of a powerful, thick-withered stallion that could bear the great weight of him. The hoofbeats of his hurrying animal were muffled in the dead-white sand that carpeted the valley, and the light of the blood-red sun clotted and ran, staining the hillside and touching the dust-whitened foliage with gory color.

Before it died, the storm had wiped from the earth every sign of the trail left by Yavapai Ben and his murdering riders. But MacThane knew the valley as well as

he knew his own anvil. There was one way into Shaman's Arroyo and two ways out. One led steeply over the rocky hills to green grass range in the north.

The other, enticingly easy, was a terrible man-trap. The verdant valley twisted and turned until it finally ended in a steep canyon. The canyon gave on a hundred mile stretch of the dearest, deadliest alkali desert that ever man had seen. A few had crossed it, but more had left their corpses a heat-cooked feast for the vultures on the glittering borax flats.

MacThane breathed his mount at the fork of the trail. He studied the rippled dust with a hopeful eye, wondering which way Yavapai Ben had chosen. If the forces of evil had reigned in the night, the powers of good were supreme by day. His glance caught the glitter of polished iron in the dust of the canyon trail.

It proved to be part of a cinch ring that a freak of the storm had left uncovered. MacThane recalled that one of Ben's riders had been traveling with a broken cinch ring, and he whispered a prayer of thanks. Yavapai Ben and his men had chosen the wrong way out of Shaman's Arroyo. Unless they were fools, they would turn back, and if they turned back, MacThane would be certain to meet them on the narrow canyon trail.

It was noon, or near it, when he sighted the four. They were plodding up the trail with Yavapai Ben leading. Their horses were half dead with thirst, barely able to shuffle one hoof ahead of the other. MacThane reined in and waited. They had not seen him yet because their heads were lowered against the glaring sun.

The iron-muscled Scot must have made an awesome appearance, sitting his horse athwart the trail as rigidly as a figure made of granite. He bore no visible weapon save a short-handled sledge that was tied to a lariat which hung from his saddle horn. Yet when Yavapai Ben saw him, a scant dozen feet away, his mouth slacked open and his black eyes bulged. He and his men looked as though the Avenging Angel himself were blocking their trail.

In a sudden agony of haste, Ben snatched both guns from their holsters and leveled them at the MacThane.

"Get out of the way!" he snarled, his voice pitched high with terror.

MacThane didn't answer. He lifted the sledge from his pommel, and tied the free end of the hide lariat to his left wrist. Then he balanced the strange weapon in his right hand as though it weighed less than a feather. The breeds watched with fascination, but all four held their guns ready.

"Get gone, you crazy Scotchman!" Yavapai Ben snarled again, taking courage from the knowledge that his bullets were faster and deadlier than the Scot's sledge.

MacThane spoke in a voice that rumbled like the crack of doom.

"There's nothing of mercy in the heart of me now, but in the name of dead Jock Biney—will ye return and stand trial like men?"

Yavapai Ben's dark eyes slitted. He sensed that he must kill or be killed here in the sweltering canyon. His fear of MacThane's ghost was less than his fear of the man, now that the red sun was shining. He fired twice, carefully. As his shots cracked out, there came the splatting of lead as it struck. Two black holes blossomed in MacThane's plaid shirt, both of them over his heart. But the man himself seemed completely unhurt. His booming laugh shook rubble down from the canyon walls.

Yavapai Ben backed away, moaning in terror. His trembling fingers triggered lead while MacThane slowly lifted the hammer over his head.

"Die now, you black-souled imps!" the Scot thundered.

The sledge flew from his mighty fist, trailing the rope behind it. Ben's horrified yell died on his lips. His horse whinnied, then bolted at the sudden sight of a bodyless head crimsoning the dust near its hoofs. The sledge was a gory and gruesome thing as it returned to MacThane's hand, obedient to his tug on the hide lariat.

THE three killers pivoted and spurred down the echoing canyon, shooting as they rode. MacThane followed, spin-

ning the sledge in a widening arc until it was a twenty-foot circle of humming death. It whistled down like a gigantic scythe as his great horse overtook the hindmost breed. There was a hollow sound, like the plop of a ripe melon breaking, and what had been a man a moment before was only a lump of quivering flesh.

Yet as he thundered along through the scorching hail of their lead, MacThane was not entirely invulnerable. A bullet had opened his cheek, from mouth to ear. Another had ripped the cap from his head. His neck was gashed, his left hand bloody. By the time his terrible sledge had tolled off another of the two fleeing killers, he swayed in the saddle like a gale-blown oak.

The last of them stopped at a bend in the canyon, turning to make a desperate stand. MacThane's relentless charge didn't falter, but just as he sent his sledge winging toward its final mark, the breed aimed a careful shot over the crook of his arm. The sledge caved his chest, and he flew from the saddle, dead before touching the ground. The bullet struck MacThane high on the forehead. Blood gushed down into his eyes, and the great bulk of him tottered, then slid to earth where it lay without moving.

It was two hours later when our posse set out from town. We followed the MacThane by the wheeling gray buzzards, and many of us turned from the sights we saw—the four grisly things on the clean canyon trail.

When we found MacThane we were sure he was dead from the way his shirt was riddled and torn. But a great pulse throbbed in his wrists, and we found that a bullet had furrowed his scalp. MacThane was unconscious, but not dead.

We gave him a quart of Donovan's best, then three of us tried to lift him, but failed.

Three grown men couldn't lift the MacThane!

It was beyond understanding how even my father could weigh so much until we thought to open his shirt. Around his waist, around his chest, completely covering his powerful torso was yard upon yard of heavy tracechain. It covered him snugly in a three-fold thickness and only my father could have borne the weight of so much well-forged iron.

We unwound the chain, and bullets dropped out of the close-fitting links. There can be no doubt that the slugs were fired by Yavapai Ben and his murdering spawns of evil.

My father lived to an age of ninety, and some folks say he didn't die at all. When Quincey's Livery burned at midnight, they claim to have seen Silver Jack standing in the flames with his checker board under his arm. MacThane went in to rescue the horses, and he never was seen again. Some folks claim they heard him talk, while the fire was wrapping him around.

"I'll play, Silver Jack, and I'll beat you again as I used to."

The fire raged the whole night through, and when the blood-red light of the dawning sun lit up the smouldering ash, the only trace they could find of my father was a broken cinch ring that he habitually wore on the fob of his watch.

There are folks who claim—and you can believe them or not—that whenever men like Yavapai Ben ride into our town, the MacThane's sledge rings through the night until the murdering hellions are gone.

PLAIN AND FANCY

I love each foot of Texas soil,
Each Texas John and Nancy—
There's something 'bout the Texas plain,
That captivates my fancy!

—Pecos Pete

TOUGH for a NAVAJO

A Novelet by CLEE WOODS

Maco and Clifford walked up to the posse with hands raised

FIGHTING TO SAVE his good name, Navajo Maco tries to show that red man and white are brothers under the skin

CHAPTER I

Two Brothers To Watch

MACO felt wonderful this morning. He stood out in front of his hogan, home to him and his seventeen-year-old brother, and sang a good luck song in the Navajo tongue with all the fervor of his wild Navajo heart:

I walk in good beauty,
In good beauty I walk,
For the earth is my home
And its people my brothers.
I keep my good luck
And no sickness, no danger
Can break the good charm
Of my wind and my rain,
My sun and the gods.

It was that ever fantastic, mysterious Navajo world where evil comes and goes according to what a man thinks and sees and feels. Deep in his blood Maco was all Navajo. Lean. Fine straight nose. Good black eyes with fun in them.

Those eyes flitted out across the narrow little bottom where corn and squash and beans grew, then to the low rimrocks red in the morning sun like great slaps of color thrown against the mesa rim. Not carefully did they look, though, the black eyes. Not carefully enough at one spot in the rimrock.

But Maco didn't feel quite as joyful as he had a moment before. He stopped his song, and kept on tying up his coarse black hair, two feet long. He had just washed his hair in suds made from crushed yucca roots. He had held his head in the sunshine to dry the hair, while all the time he had kept thinking of the squaw dance.

Such fun at the squaw dance! The great leaping fire roaring up from whole pine logs standing on end. The chant of the medicine man. Then the drum and the singers and the girls dancing by themselves in the ring of young men, until they stole out one by one and chose partners. Then a girl holding onto your arm while you danced around and around, you forward and she backwards—all night such fun it was.

Maco put up his hair in a chongo knot at the back of his head. Into the hair he tied a small piece of good-luck turquoise that let him laugh at the lightning and all danger, for by it Mother Turquoise would keep him safe, no matter what.

IT WAS not so with his seventeen-year-old brother. The brother had been away too much to Indian school. He scoffed at the old Navajo ways. He even had a white man's name—Clifford. Clifford's hair was cut short, all stiff and unruly. His mind was unruly, too. Maco couldn't make Clifford hold to any good Navajo belief, like magic which the medicinemen made. Nonetheless he loved that kid brother, for had he not been brother and father and almost mother to Clifford ever since Clifford was six and he eleven?

There Maco always let his mind stop. He wouldn't think of the way his mother had died with pneumonia the next morning after the medicineman got through with his chant, and how they had got Mr. Crane from the trading post to come and bury her for them. Nor of the way the horse went wild, with a devil inside him, and threw his father into the rocks—and again of the way the white trader had come to carry the body off and bury it in a deep grave instead of covering it with sticks and dirt and stone in a crevice in the rocks. It made bad luck, ever to remember such things as burials, but he must always remember how good Mr. Crane and Herbert and all the family had been to him and Clifford.

He went back into the dome-shaped hogan and took new red yarn from its place on a nail in the log beams that supported the mud roof. He tied the yarn about his chongo knot. Then he pulled over his head a brilliant purple blouse—a new blouse V-shaped at the neck. He always bought the same kind of purple velvet and got his grandmother to make his blouses. Clifford had gone to white-man shirts long ago. Red shirts always.

Maco pulled the blouse down around his spare waist. Then, hearing a grunt from his brother, Clifford, Maco spun toward the door. There was tall, thin Noposo coming through the door. Bad Navajo, Noposo. A breed he was, maybe only three-eighths Navajo and the rest American and Mexican. He had on a Colt gun, when he knew it was against Reservation rules for any but Navajo police to carry guns. But Maco was noticing Noposo's clothes, too. Purple blouse just like his own, and the same kind of denim breeches Maco always wore.

Hardly had Noposo straightened up than another man was pushing back the old elkskin that hung over the door. This one was not so tall. More like Clifford's size, of medium height and slender shoulders. But such a face! Bitten deep with shadowy lines and a mouth like the gash of a knife across a throat. And glittering black eyes that saw at a glance everything in the hogan from sheepskin beds on the floor to the earthen olla or pot simmering its beans over the dying coals.

Maco knew that white man only by sight. He was a white renegade. He and Noposo had married sisters. He had an evil reputation among the Navajos, and twice he'd been away to jail. Navajos called him Mad-Face because he always looked in ill humor.

Maco had last seen Noposo in the courthouse at Gallup. Then it had been to testify that he saw Noposo riding a pinto horse up the canyon at deep dusk, toward Hort Crane's trading post which later that night was robbed and burned. He'd heard that Noposo had vowed in jail later, before they took him to the penitentiary for eight years, that some day he'd get even with every man, Navajo and white, who had testified against him.

But it hadn't been eight years yet. Only four or five. And here he was back in the country to keep his promise of evil. Maco thought of the piece of turquoise in his hair and wished that he had sung more good luck songs this morning. But then he and Clifford had been in a hurry, getting everything ready so they could go to the squaw dance. They had hired Willie Calico to come over and take care of their sheep while they were gone. They had to show Willie Calico where to take the herd up in the head of this canyon by day and make him promise well to fetch the sheep back to the cedar-branch corral at night, here by the hogan.

Noposo said in Navajo, "Well, I am here again, Maco."

MACO fought back an inward shiver at the meaning of the words. Noposo's voice had changed in these few years. It was hard now, and much like the voice of a very tough white man Maco had heard in Gallup once.

"Four years, eleven months and nine days in the New Mexico pen," said Noposo. "You helped put me there, Maco."

Maco had an instinctive certainty that Noposo meant it to be a terrible thing that he was going to deal out to him.

"But it's old man Crane I'm back to get," Noposo said. "That will pay mighty well in cash, too."

Old Hort Crane, by patient waiting and ingenious deductions, finally had clinched evidence that had sent Noposo to the pen for arson and robbery. But if Noposo had been bad in his heart then, he was a devil on the loose now.

And this Mad-Face with him was of the worst breed. Navajos believed that he was a refugee from the law in some far-off place, because he never would show himself when white people came onto their part of the reservation. Married to a Navajo, he'd been living in a hogan the Navajo way, turned completely Navajo in everything but good behavior.

"What do you want of me and Clifford?" Maco asked, hoping desperately that it would be no more than giving Noposo a horse or a gun.

"You will find out," Noposo told him. "Both of you, follow me out of the hogan. Mad-Face, you drive them out."

Noposo jerked out his gun, and somehow all along Maco had known this was coming. Mad-Face pulled a six-shooter from breeches waistband. Noposo backed out the hogan door, gun on the two young Navajos.

For an instant Maco thought of making a desperate break right now. This thing was bad. All bad, and lots of bad. But that dreadful look in the faded gray eyes of Mad-Face chilled Maco to the very marrow of his bones. He was not used to gray eyes anyway; always black eyes here on the reservation where few white men ever came.

In spite of the mean gray eyes, though, Maco looked for any slim chance of escape. He'd taken some reckless chances in his twenty-two years, like that night three years ago when he shot at and slightly wounded a white man whom he had caught robbing a Navajo grave of the jewelry buried with the dead. And the time before that when he had broken down the fence of a white rancher over on the "Proclamation Strip" and let dying cattle into a water-hole which the rancher had fenced off.

Clifford, too, had been considered reckless at Indian school. Last year he had

been sent home because he'd whipped an overbearing white man teacher. But Maco had conquered his impulsive self. He'd settled down all right. Clifford hadn't so much as put a burr under a saddle since he'd got expelled from school. But at the Indian agency and at the trading posts white men still had the two brothers down as young Indians to watch. Maco knew this, and it made him all the more determined to win a better name for himself. Especially did he value the good esteem of Mr. Crane and Herbert.

Mad-Face said, "Go on—step." His words were so mean and full of threat that Maco started toward the door. Already Clifford was reaching the outside, with Noposo backing away from him.

All at once Clifford made a lunge at Noposo and grappled with him. Maco knew in that same second that he must whirl on Mad-Face or the white renegade would shoot Clifford. Maco already was spinning around and grabbing for the gun hand of Mad-Face. But Mad-Face fooled him completely. He must have expected such an attack. Instead of shooting or jumping backward, he clipped Maco on the chin with a left jab. The fist landed so fast and hard that Maco's head was snapped back and he wilted onto the dirt floor, so dazed he couldn't move for a full ten seconds.

CLIFFORD had told him about boxing at school, but Maco still had to learn about the power in the clenched hands of white men. Only vaguely did he know what was going on. Just outside the door Clifford was getting the best of Noposo, and the breed was yelling to Mad-Face for help. Mad-Face, thinking Maco knocked cold, sprang out through the door. Of course that meant the end of Clifford's valiant fight.

With tremendous will power, Maco began pulling himself up. Onto hands and knees first, head doddering a little. Then brain clearing better, movement coming back to his limbs. He got onto his knees, and felt groggy through and through. But he had to act. He couldn't fail Clifford.

Maco staggered a few steps to the left, reaching for a heavy steel skillet, the only weapon he could lay hands on. But just as he straightened up with it, Mad-Face came springing back through the door. Maco tried to swing on him with the skillet, but he was amazed at how weak he still was from that blow.

And Mad-Face was fast, sure. He leaped in and let Maco have another left rip of fist to chin, and Maco went down again. Out cold this time.

CHAPTER II

Renegades' Trick

WHEN MACO knew once more what was going on, Noposo and Mad-Face had him outside on the ground beside Clifford. His first conscious thought was to play dead for a while, and watch for his chance. Then he realized that his wrists were raw-hided behind his back. And there lay Clifford by the tongue of Maco's new Turnbull wagon, also trussed up.

"Get up," Noposo said to Maco, taking him by the collar and giving him a yank. "You'll get shot the next time you try any smart stuff."

Mad-Face was getting Clifford to his feet the same way. Both Clifford and Maco had had their saddled horses tied under cedar trees near the hogan. Noposo and Mad-Face got onto the horses. Then they made Clifford and Maco walk over into the next shallow canyon. There the two rascals had concealed the brothers' horses down in dry washes.

The two men forced the Navajos onto these mounts. But they kept the lead ropes in their own hands, so that neither captive had the least chance to break away. With no further explanation, the pair led Maco and brother off down the canyon. Maco cringed with shame. He had fallen down, had failed Clifford. He had let these two enemies best him com-

pletely. He was helpless.

Within a mile the canyon grew deeper walled, with rough, rocky sides. Where a small canyon came in, Noposo rode ahead to see that nobody was in sight, because two Navajo families lived up the side canyon. Noposo nodded, and Mad-Face brought the captives on.

In another mile and a half the canyon opened out considerably. High red buttes lifted up almost perpendicularly from the bottom. A low mountain climbed away from the red buttes on the south. At one place the red buttes were broken by a wide ledge, on which piñon and cedar grew sparsely. Then there was a deep break in the buttes, what in Spanish was called a *rincon* or corner.

Into the *rincon* the pair took Maco and Clifford. Here poñel shrub and lemita brush grew thick until piñon and cedar took over back close to the red butte. Screened by the low timber the two captors halted and told the brothers to get off. Maco was numbed with still more fear. The red cliffs above him held the spirit of his grandfather, who had died up there a lonely old recluse.

Still watching for some chance to make a second break, Maco slid off his horse. He could tell that Clifford had the same frantic thoughts, but their captors were doubly cautious now.

"Back up to this tree," Mad-Face ordered Maco, nodding at a piñon that grew against the red sandstone.

Maco didn't move. They were going to tie him up, maybe shoot him, here in this lonely spot where bodies wouldn't be found for days or even weeks.

Realizing Maco's mental debate, Noposo gouged his six-shooter against Clifford's back. But he spoke to Maco, as always in Navajo, "Do what you're told," he said, "or I'll blow a hole through your brother."

Maco might take a chance with his own life, but not Clifford's. Whatever this pair of evil men had in mind, better not prod them into killing Clifford. Maco stepped over to the piñon tree and let Mad-Face tie him to it. They raw-hided Clifford to another tree some fifty yards away, apparently so the two brothers couldn't communicate with each other in any manner.

Noposo took out his dirty old handkerchief and said to Maco, "Open your mouth." Glad that it wasn't a bullet to silence him, Maco opened his mouth and let Noposo gag him with the handkerchief. Noposo didn't stop until he had Maco's mouth so wrapped there was no possible way for him to get the gag out.

WHEN THEY had both brothers tied up and gagged, the two schemers stopped in front of Maco. It hurt Maco to look into the mean eyes. Never had he felt so helpless. Nor so dreaded every word or move from men.

"Here's the way it is," Noposo now said. "There won't be time to tell you when we get back. I ache all through me, about old Hort Crane. Now I get even. When I am even, he is dead. His trading post is robbed once more."

Mad-Face added, "Then we hurry back here. Our two horses are left for you. They will be rested. Get on them and ride. For a posse will be after you. Maybe five minutes behind, maybe an hour. That depends."

Noposo picked it up. "They'll be after you because our clothes are like yours." He shrugged, glancing down at the same kind of purple blouse and denim overalls Maco always had worn. Mad-Face had on clothes just like Clifford's. "And," Noposo added, "we'll do other things to make the people at Crane's post believe that you and Clifford did robbing and killing."

Mad-Face put in. "Don't let them catch you. They'll hang you right here to one of these trees if you wait for them and try to talk yourself out of it."

"Yes," said Noposo, "they'll hang you. Or shoot you and leave your bodies here for the buzzards. Don't forget the Navajo man, Gonzales, that white men killed in the hogan at Crown Point just a few years ago."

Maco knew all about that. News of such things didn't get far beyond the Reserva-

tion, but white men sometimes took law into their own hands and acted fast, when a Navajo did something bad.

"And listen to this, Maco," said Noposo, as if he were telling a friend good news. "We will get a lot of money from the Crane post. This time of wool buying, Crane keeps about fifteen thousand dollars on hand, I hear from a Navajo clerk. Besides, there are the necklaces, bracelets, rings and beads in the pawn cage—six or eight thousand more. So we will give you three hundred dollars apiece. On that you can leave the country and have a good time somewhere else."

Noposo spoke as though he were making the brothers an attractive offer. Somewhere else? To Maco there was no world but that of this desert country, with his Navajo people. He loved it all. He would rather die than leave it under any circumstances, much less leave it as the supposed killer of Mr. Crane.

Maco had a great respect for old man Crane—Punkin Top, they called him, because of his baldness. Mr. Crane had been good to him. He had befriended Maco's mother many times when she needed money or a doctor and the Government doctor wouldn't come. Mr. Crane had a son with whom Maco had played as boys together, and Maco still thought a lot of young Herbert Crane.

It hurt Maco more than fear itself hurt, when he thought of the loss of faith all his white friends would have in him. Their friendship had been such a good thing. Now all this he would lose. It would make the whites distrust other Navajos, too. That also hurt.

But Maco saw how it was. Because in the past he and Clifford had done some things not so good, they had earned a name as reckless boys. Even many Navajos thought them pretty uncertain bets to make good men. Noposo and Mad-Face had been smart enough to figure it out that way, too. Every white man in the country would jump to the conclusion that Maco and Clifford had turned robbers and killers.

Those were only the beginning of Maco's tormenting thoughts as he waited there, tied to the tree and gagged so that he couldn't have made himself heard down to the road. His mind was in chaos. One moment he was ready to defy any white posse that came after him. The next he felt a cold, wild chill run up and down his back at the mental picture of his dead body swaying from the limb of a tree. A Navajo dreads the dead as nothing else in all the world, and it drove deeper terror into Maco to picture his own body swaying by a rope. Dead. Ready for buzzards and coyotes.

TIME PASSED like the hell that the missionary talked about. Torture in his mind. Torture in his heart. Waiting here for the beginning of a race ahead of white men with guns and a rope. Once, peering through piñon tops, he saw a small section of what looked like a ladder. But it moved, swaying in the breeze. That frightened Maco still more.

It was a long time, and then Maco heard a flock of sheep on the move, down the canyon. That would be Hanaba, Cripple-Leg's wife, and her two girls. They were taking their sheep to water down at the dirt tank half a mile below.

Maco tried to yell to Hanaba, but the sounds he got through his gag couldn't be heard that far, he feared. He listened. Clifford also was trying to make himself heard by Hanaba and her girls.

Through the brush Maco finally caught sight of Hanaba. She kept pushing her sheep along. The sheep strung themselves out in a long bunch. And suddenly by an inspiration Maco went to counting them. He nodded his head once as each sheep passed a certain clump of rabbit bush. Eighty-four, counting ewes, lambs and the four bucks.

After they had all passed, Maco watched closely through the piñon boughs. Only now and then could he catch sight of the woman and the girls in their long wide skirts that swept the ground. When he did see them, though, he took particular pains to notice what they did. Which side of the herd ten-year-

old Cho-ko-la was on. Where the mother drove. What she called out to the girls. The horseshoe that twelve-year-old Nadeste picked up. All that.

After Hanaba's cavalcade had gone out of hearing it grew more dreadful for Maco. He sometimes tore crazily at his thongs, all for nothing. It seemed once he would choke on the gag, so awful was it. Several times he listened quietly. He could hear Clifford trying vainly to tear himself loose.

Hanaba and sheep and girls came back by, and once more Maco tried frenziedly to make himself heard. Once Hanaba did stop and listen. Then the girls. In a moment all three took to running, leaving the sheep to come on as they would. Maco guessed that they had heard Clifford's moans through his gag. Navajo-like, they had let superstition and fear hit them, and had run off. That, though, was something. . . .

At last! There came the beat of galloping hoofs. Noposo and Mad-Face, sure enough. They came into the woods on a weary gallop. Both were excited, harried by fear. Mad-Face had a blood stain on his left arm just below the shoulder. He had a gunnysack tied to his saddlehorn.

They flung themselves off their horses. Mad-Face snatched the gunnysack from the saddle-horn and he and Noposo ran up to Maco.

"We got the work done," said Noposo in Navajo. "Look!" He held up another gunnysack. "The pawn stuff."

"Give 'em some," said Mad-Face.

That was part of the trickery. Digging hand into gunnysack, Noposo thrust a few rings, a bracelet and a squash-blossom necklace into Maco's pockets. Running to Clifford, Mad-Face planted both money and jewelry on Maco's brother. He cut Clifford's thongs and drove him over to Maco, at gun point. Noposo cut Maco loose, while Mad-Face kept gun on both brothers. Noposo was careful to gather up every piece of rawhide.

They still had one more fiendish trick. Mad-Face jerked from his pocket a small leather bag the size of a large watch. From it he poured something into Maco's boots, then more into Clifford's boots. Maco saw that it was a mixture of sharp little rocks and gravel.

"Just so you can't follow us," Mad-Face explained. Pocketing the bag, he said to Noposo. "Let's get out of here." Together they raced off afoot into the thickest of the piñon growth, their derisive shouts echoing behind them.

SHOT THROUGH with fear and rage, Maco started to rush after them. But the stuff in his boots cut his feet until he cried, "Ouch!" He kept going, though, until he saw the folly of cutting his feet to pieces.

"Let's empty our boots first," Clifford exclaimed. "Our feet will never be any good to us in shreds."

They fell down and tore at their boots. But it was slow work without bootjacks. They got the boots off finally, emptied them and hauled them back on. Then they hit off on the trail of the two men, ignoring the danger of an ambush. They ran as much from fear as they did in any hope of overtaking the two men and besting them.

What could they do, without gun or knife? But running was better than waiting for the white posse to come. Maco couldn't shake off the fearful dread of facing Mr. Crane's friends and his son Herbert, with guilt so cleverly unloaded on him and Clifford. Not one man of them would believe the story of their having been tied up all this time.

Not three hundred yards away they lost the trail of the two men. They had suddenly quit making sign. Clifford stopped and turned to his brother.

"Maco," he said, "we better wait for the white men. We don't have a chance and no weapons. They'll catch us anyway."

Maco looked at his brother. It hurt him deep to see the ashen hue about the corners of the boy's mouth.

Maco whispered, "They'll hang us. They won't believe us. Let's keep running away. Like Mad-Face said, we better leave the country—forever."

CHAPTER III

Bid for Life

THE VERY thought of giving up his own Navajo country and people hit Maco harder than the prospect of forever dodging the law. For murder and robbery the white man's law would hunt him and Clifford until they were caught, and two Navajo boys could be spotted so readily out anywhere away from the Reservation.

"Yes, you're right," Maco agreed with Clifford, in reversal of his former words. "We had better wait for the posse."

"First thing then," said Clifford, "let's go back and hide the jewelry and money that—"

"No," Maco objected. "We'll tell it just as it happened. Did you see—I wonder if that was a ladder I saw over in there against the cliff. But the thing swayed in the wind."

Clifford started to answer, then cut short his words. Off there only a quarter of a mile away came five white men as hard as worn-out horses could carry them. Maco stepped up onto a dead log so he could see the posse better.

Leading them was Herbert Crane, son of the trader the renegades had said they were going to kill. Another man was Mr. Baylor, the Government employee who taught Navajos how to farm. A third looked like a tourist stranger. But the last two, riding side by side, were the Farrody brothers, tough white fellows who owned a cow ranch adjacent to this part of the Reservation. The Farrodys always had trouble with Navajos living near their ranch.

Not a big posse, but men hard to face just the same. Clifford himself let the dread of those five men change him once more.

"Keep still," he whispered. "Maybe they'll ride on by and not find us."

"No—look!" said Maco. "They see the tracks of our horses."

Slowly then the two brothers walked down to meet the posse. Maco had a hard time making each foot move forward. He wanted to whirl and run, the way you do from a great black bear. But there could be no running from this thing. It would come on and on and get them. Every day until they were caught it would be hell, just dreading the time they would be locked up.

Maco saw Herbert Crane point excitedly, and spur forward. Then all the men gigged their horses harder. They had seen Maco and Clifford.

But they slowed down in a moment, fearing some trick after the first flush of excitement gave way to caution.

"Come on!" Maco called, and his voice was shaky. "We're not the men you want. See, we give up."

Maco lifted his hands. The posse still was a hundred yards away. In spite of himself Maco turned his head and looked at the great wall of the redstone cliffs there to his right. If only he were up on top of that and had a horse! No, he would still have to stay and face—

His thought broke off. In that glance at the cliff, he had looked at the spot where he had seen the sway of a ladder. And it *was* a rope ladder, with a man climbing out near the top. Noposo was on it. But the ladder was back in the *rincon*, so that the members of the posse couldn't see it from where they pulled up their horses.

Did Noposo and Mad-Face have horses beyond the top of the cliff? Maco knew of no way up from the ledge to the top.

"Come on to us, and keep your hands up," Herbert Crane called.

How different his voice now. It was a voice Maco never had known before. Chilled. Bitter. Herbert was short, slender, but with his keen blue eyes he had such force he seemed much larger.

Maco cried. "Come this way and look. A rope ladder!" He pointed excitedly. "It's Noposo on it, right at the top of the ledge and—"

He cut himself off again. Noposo had disappeared over the rim of the ledge.

The ladder was being pulled up fast, disappearing with him.

Maco hurried toward the five white men. As he went he tried to tell them his story. But fear blunted his words. Blunted even his ability to think and talk. He stammered, sounded uncertain.

MACO AND Clifford marched on up to the posse, both with hands above their heads. Neither armed. Maco tried to fight down the trembling in his knees.

Maco took hold of himself. He had to tell it right. He had to put truth into his words so surely that they would believe him.

"Neither of us shot him," he said. "It was Noposo and Mad-Face. They made us prisoners. They brought us here and tied us to trees while they were gone."

"Maco, don't lie to me like that!" Herbert exclaimed.

In the white boy's words was something like an appeal. Maco wondered if it could be possible that Herbert was doubly hurt by the belief he was lying. Such good friends, ever since they had been nine or ten.

If only Herbert Crane wouldn't look so at him! Always they had been good pards, he and Herbert. He had fought for Herbert and Herbert had fought for him. They had broken colts together. He had taken Herbert to see secret Navajo ceremonies that few white men ever were permitted to witness. They'd laughed so much together at everything.

"Which one of you shot him?" Herbert asked, and his taut voice proclaimed his intent to shoot the guilty one. Today Herbert was a man.

Shep Farrody exclaimed. "There's a handy limb over yonder on that big piñon! We'll make these Navvys remember this for fifty years."

Herbert added. "You bet we will, and—"

He stopped. Maybe he had just remembered his talk with Maco only a few weeks back. They had talked about an old

A TALL TEXAS TALE

SOMETHING FISHY

OLD Sad Saggett and Popper McGee were in the winter of life before they finally got down Galveston way for some deep-sea fishing, leaving Popper's young whippersnapper, Flip McGee, to do the chores on the old S Bar M while they were gone.

They rented a boat and took off with high expectations, but after a good many fruitless hours were willing to allow maybe this here deep-sea fishing wasn't all it was cracked up to be, and they returned at low ebb with a goodly thirst apiece and nothing more.

But Sad and Popper were not a pair to give up easy. They had too much moss on their horns for that. So, after slaking their thirst to the wee hours, they rented another boat and set out just as dawn began poking up over the edge of the Gulf. Two hours later they hit a spot where the fish practically jumped into the boat.

They quit fishing only when their catch threatened to swamp the boat. As they neared shore, Popper asked suddenly, "Hey, did you mark that spot where we caught this mess today, so's we can find it again tomorrow?"

"I did," Sad replied solemnly. "I sure did."

"How'd you mark it?"

"Simple," Sad said. "I just scratched our brand on the bottom of the boat."

"Sounds fair enough," Popper agreed. Then as he thought on it awhile, a frown grew on his craggy features. "But supposin' we don't get this here same boat tomorrow?"

Navajo warrior, Tso-to, who was nearly a hundred years old now. Tso-to could be coaxed sometimes to tell about his days on the warpath. Herbert himself had remarked how far the Navajos had come along the civilized trail since this old man was a baby, and how few Navajos nowadays ever committed a serious crime.

Maco said, "I can prove we have been here all the time. Go find Hanaba and her girls. Ask them what they talked about when they were passing here both going and coming. Then come back and Clifford and I can tell you what they said and did while we were tied up and gagged. Ask them how many sheep they took to water, and we can tell you the right number."

Said Mr. Baylor, Government farmer, "Men, that might prove something."

"So it might," agreed the tourist. "Let's two of us go hunt up the woman and girls."

"All right," conceded Herbert, "and while you're gone we'll let Maco tell us how many sheep the women drove and what they talked about. If the tales jibe, then we'll know."

After more talk, Mr. Baylor and the tourist, who was named Blake, went to find Hanaba. Then Maco and Clifford began to answer questions, lots of them. The questions kept coming and Herbert even wrote some answers down. After a long time Baylor and Blake came back.

"How many sheep did Hanaba take by?" Herbert asked Baylor.

"Eighty-four, the woman said."

"Right," Herbert said. Then he asked, "What did one little girl pick up as she went along?"

"A horseshoe."

"Did the woman and girls run away?"

"Yes. They said they heard fearful sounds."

Herbert looked at Maco with great relief in his countenance. A few more comparisons just about convinced all but the Farrody brothers. Men steeped in prejudice as these men were just couldn't believe even the truth when it conflicted with their hatreds.

Nevertheless, Maco knew it was time to make his bid for his life. He said quietly, "Up there on the big red butte ledge are Noposo and Mad-Face. Both are bad men. They'll kill several of you if you go up after them. But let me go up. I'll fight them the Indian way. I'll fetch them back for you—maybe breathing still, maybe not."

Shep Farrody scoffed, "Yeah, turn you loose so you can make a getaway! Not much."

But Herbert Crane had turned in the saddle and was looking at the big red cliff with the offset ledge halfway up. Once Herbert had tried to get Maco to go up there with him, but Maco had bluntly refused. Maco's grandfather, Haa-zhon-ne, had taken refuge up there away back in 1870 after the conquered Navajos were permitted to come back to their reservation from internment as Bosque Redondo.

HAA-ZHON-NE had defied a white captain about an order he resented, because it offended his sense of dignity. He had retreated to the ledge and hidden. He built a little rock hogan back in a shallow cave and in that he had lived the rest of his life. Once every five days at deep dusk he would come out to the edge of the cliff and let down a rawhide string, and his kinsmen would put food into a buckskin bag. Haa-zhon-ne would draw it up and go back to his lonely life.

He had kept this up until he was very old. Then one night he didn't come for his food, nor did he answer when they shouted up to him. Nobody went up to bury him. No Navajo ever had gone up there, because of their fear of a dead body at first, and then deeper fear of a haunted place ever after.

But Maco knew the secret way his grandfather had gained the ledge. Over at the north end of the ledge was a series of natural steps up a steep place, then a narrow little bare rock ledge to a place where water falling over had cut out a steep trough. The trough led up to the worst part of the climb where a man had to hang onto the steep slope of rock like

a lizard, with nothing but bare toe-holds.

Herbert said slowly to Maco, "If you got up there and refused to come down, we could starve you to death."

"But I mean it, Herbert," Maco insisted. "I'll come down—after I get them for you."

Herbert said, "We'll give you a try, Maco."

Shep Farrody growled. "That'd mean giving him a gun, so he can kill somebody else."

Herbert was taken aback by that reminder. A man sure would need a gun to go up there after Mad-Face and Noposo. Maco felt a deep cold thing begin in his back and go all the way through him. He knew what he was going to do, and it made him feel like ice from toes to scalp.

Walter Farrody seconded his brother. "It's just the old Navajo trickery, Herb. Let's don't get chicken-hearted over this thing."

Then Maco said it. "Give me a gun—yes. But it can be empty."

"No, Maco!" Clifford cried. "You'd be a fool to go up there even with a loaded gun."

"It's the only way they'll let me go," Maco said, speaking in English all the time so they wouldn't all the more suspect trickery.

"All right." Herbert took decisive leadership, silencing the Farrodys with a motion of the hand. "We'll let you go. But we will let you take a knife."

Maco said, "And some rawhide to tie them with?"

"Sure," Herbert agreed.

While Herbert unloaded a six-shooter, he gave Maco further orders. "We'll see you to the foot of the climb. You've got to be back with them in just thirty minutes after you disappear over the rim. If you're not, we'll fetch a hundred white men out here after you. Besides"—he turned on Clifford—"we'll hold him as a hostage. Just you try any funny stuff and we'll swing your brother too fast to remember."

Maco was trembling by the time he reached the head of the weathered trough in the cliff face.

From here on it was those tricky toe-holds and small cracks where a man could hook only his fingers.

An empty gun for a bluff on Mad-Face and Noposo! What if they didn't bluff? What if his foot slipped up there? Maco looked downward, away down, to the rocky foot of the cliff, where his body would thud if he fell. He grew dizzy. Closed his eyes. Cold sweat began oozing out all over him.

Not one bullet in the Colt! Mad-Face didn't seem to be the sort of man who would bluff under any circumstances. That man was mean.

A tough, mean man.

Maco began climbing again. One careful hold at a time. Sick through and through but still climbing. Once old Tso-to had said a man really proved he was brave only when he fought in spite of fear.

If a man had no fear and fought, was he at all brave?

AT LAST Maco made it to the rim. The next minute he would be moving out of sight of those below. But he might be coming into view of the two enemies. What were they doing? Did they know that their presence up here was suspected? Maco didn't have any answer.

Probably they had watched all the time, wanting to know just how safe their getaway had been. Probably they knew that the little posse was waiting down there somewhere.

But they couldn't have seen Maco on his climb.

He peered over the rim. Not a sign of life. Back there in the cave he could see the little stone hogan where Haa-zhon-ne had lived out his hermit existence. A few scrub trees and shrubs mingled with parched grass out along the ledge, which here was some fifty feet wide.

But for the next twenty feet in front of Maco was nothing but barren slope of the cliff.

CHAPTER IV

They Walk in Beauty

SLOWLY Maco crawled up over the cliff. An inch at a time. Yet knowing that his half-hour already was being used up too fast. And never forgetting that empty Colt in his breeches waistband. His black eyes examined every rock, every bunch of grass, every scrub tree. Where were they? Or had they gone on out over the top? Maco didn't know whether there was a possible exit from the top or not. If there was and they had gone, he was in a bad way.

Now he was reaching a bunch of grass. Then prickly pear cactus. Better. Much, much better. An Indian naturally loves the protection of any cover. He bellied himself into it all, the sweat quit coming freely over his face.

Then his eyes went bigger and the sweat started anew. Further along was Mad-Face, lying on the edge of the rim, looking down. They must be uneasy about the lingering of the posse down there, without a hanging.

Maco was in only a scant bit of grass. But he lay motionless and looked closer than ever. Some fifteen steps beyond Mad Face was Noposo, but he was sitting back behind a barrel-sized rock and a rifle leaned against the rock. He was eating something. They probably had cached food up here.

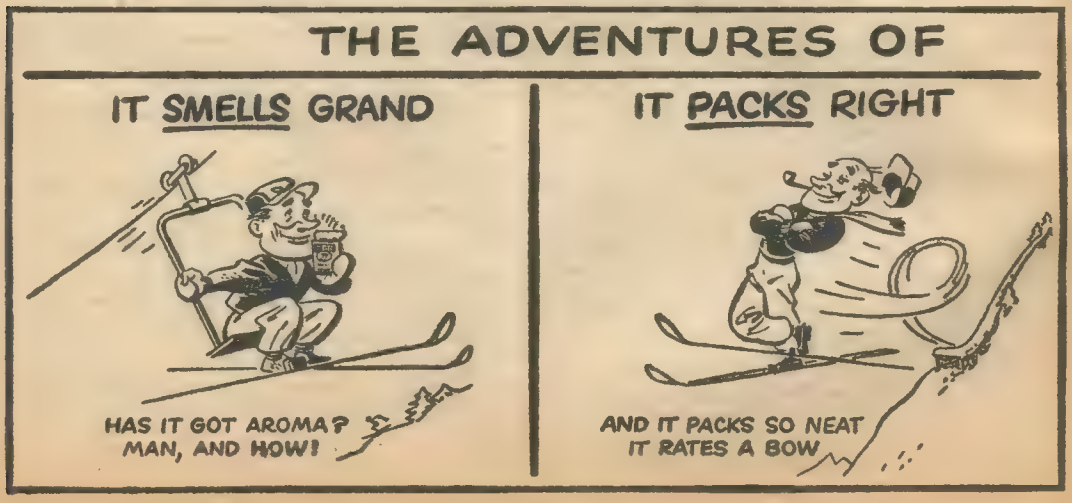
Maco was thinking. "They're too far apart for me to bluff both at the same time. One will start shooting. And me with an empty gun! Better wait until they come together."

But they stayed on that way, minute after minute, and time was running out. Maco came to a two-pronged decision. He couldn't wait any longer. And he had to have something to fight with. Rocks. A stick. His knife. They all weren't enough. A new hope hit him. What had Grandfather Haa-zhon-ne left in his hogan when he died?

He crawled toward the old hogan stuck back there beneath the overhang of the cliff. He fought back all his fear of the dead. Not even ghosts could keep him back now. Whatever weapons his grandfather had owned when he died, they must be there in the hogan yet.

Nearer and nearer he crawled to the hogan. Still neither of the two men moved from their positions. But they spoke now and then in low tones. Now Maco was only ten feet from the hogan entrance. The old buffalo robe that had hung there for the door was only curled-up bits of leather now. Inside the hogan it was dark, forbidding. Very forbidding.

Over Maco suddenly rushed all the



superstition of the Navajo. Their terrible fear of the dead. Their obsession about haunted hogans. Once he had seen a Navajo man go through a four-day "sing" or ceremony that cost him three hundred dollars, just to cleanse his soul of the taint of bleached human bones he had accidentally walked across.

Maco told himself. "I can't go in there. The evil spirits are there, waiting for me." No sooner had he said that to himself, though, then he thought of the empty six-shooter. No, Mad-Face wasn't a man to be bluffed. Maybe Noposo, yes, but never Mad-Face.

Maco lay there a full two minutes, half crazy with his thoughts. Doom to go into that haunted old hogan. Doom for Clifford and himself too, maybe, if he didn't keep his word and get the thing done in half an hour. He looked at his watch. Only seven minutes left!

Maco reached fingers back into his chongo knot of hair. The fingers found the piece of good-luck turquoise. Felt of it.

"It's supposed to bring me good luck," he tried to assure himself.

But now, right now in his moment of severest trial, Maco knew that he didn't believe any more in the guardianship of a tiny piece of blue stone. He never could believe that again. A man had to fight it out for himself, both what good he got and what bad he kept away from himself. That was it. This he knew now. This he would always know. That was what Herbert had told him once, and he had remembered it only a little until now, because he hadn't believed it before.

Maco took a forward push toward the hogan. Then another. Crawling. Near enough now to see into the place.

No skeleton there, as he had feared. Whatever had become of his grandfather's body, no remains of it were here now.

Maco reached the door and crawled through. Hastily he ran his eyes around, accustoming them to the semi-darkness. Two old pottery vessels, one still standing with its cone-shaped bottom in the ashes at the center of the hogan. Rat-gnawed sheepskin bed on the dirt floor. Remnants of herbs still stuck in the rafters. A can of tobacco. Yes, and the bow and arrows of Haa-zhon-ne tied there to a rafter. Steel-pointed arrows, the kind the Navajos had substituted for stone arrowheads after meeting the white man. But the bowstring long ago had been gnawed away by mice or rats.

Maco got to his feet and took down the weapon. From his pocket he pulled the raw-hide he had brought along to tie his two enemies with. The bow, kept dry all these years, had lost only a little of its strength and resiliency. Maco fitted an arrow to makeshift bowstring and felt of

[*Turn page*]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET

IT'S THE PIPE-BLEND CHAMP YOU MUST ALLOW

IT CAN'T BITE!

A BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS, EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE. SIR WALTER RALEIGH STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF — NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL.

It costs no more to get the best!

it. He was not an expert bowman. But he had done well enough to enter contests on feast days, and once he would have won if Bushyhead hadn't been just a little better.

"Now more crawling," Maco thought. "Which man first?"

Let it be Mad-Face. Get the worst man first. Surprise him the Indian way. Maco crawled out of the hogan and started down through the grass. He kept bow and five arrows in his left hand, the bow ready for quick use. His father had taught him this, but with the doleful comment that Navajos never would hunt down their enemies that way again.

Maco heard a tiny snap of something dry. He whirled, looking to his right. There was Noposo only ten steps away, with gun aimed on him. Somehow Noposo had discovered his presence here, and the wily half-breed had got the drop on him. Did Mad-Face know too?

In Navajo Noposo said, "I don't want to shoot you unless you make me. Turn loose bow and arrows. Lift your hands."

MACO knew Noposo would have shot him already, except for the fact he didn't want the report of the gun to be heard down below.

"Got him all right?" he heard Mad-Face call in a guarded tone, and Mad-Face was coming.

Maco knew he was lost indeed if he let the two of them get together here over him. But Noposo would shoot, no matter who heard, if he was forced to it. What would happen if he surrendered to them? They would never let him live. Not a second time, with Mad-Face bossing the deal.

Maco asked. "What'll you do to me if I surrender?"

"You'll find that out later," Noposo retorted. "Come on—surrender and fast."

Maco had a crazy thought. Noposo was only a half-breed in blood, but he was all Navajo in superstitions. Neither he nor Mad-Face had entered the hogan, in all probability because of their superstitious fear of the little rock house. Mad-Face himself had taken on some Navajo superstitions since living with a Navajo wife.

Maco said, "Naposo, I don't have to give you the bows and arrows. The *chindis* have guarded them in there for many years. Now they're coming to take them back. Look! Look, Noposo!"

Maco fairly screamed the last words. He made it sound as though he saw Navajo devils swarming out of the hogan. Noposo whirled his head only half-way around. Maybe he saw no *chindis*. Maybe it occurred to him by that time that it was only Maco's trick. Whatever the explanation, he snapped his head back and pulled the trigger of his Colt.

But Maco had gone into action. Slapping arrow to bow. Whipping both up. Sending an arrow zipping for Noposo's breast.

Noposo fired in such haste and excitement that he pulled off. Maco, too, had shot his arrow too fast. The steel point missed Noposo's face by inches. Both men tried frantically to get in second shots.

Noposo had only to slap hammer back and pull the trigger. Maco's second arrow couldn't be turned loose in any such time. Just as Noposo was firing his bullet Maco leaped to his feet, fitting arrow as he came up. Noposo missed him again. But almost with the same sound Mad-Face fired from below, at Maco's back. The bullet hit Maco in his left thigh. He hardly felt its impact, but the leg went numb and he had little use of it. He was about to fall.

Then he remembered what the old warrior, Tso-to, had told him about battle. "You forget yourself. You just let the other side have it hard. That is all. Then you win and live, or you die and there is no more."

Maco's bow was up now and the arrow leaping out. He managed to stay on his feet while he shot. The arrow drove through the air so fast the eye hardly could have followed it. But not as straight as Maco might have wished. He aimed at the chest. The arrow went high. But either by good luck or by Noposo's attempt to dodge, the arrow caught him flush in the throat. With a gurgling cry,

Noposo whirled and tried to run, tearing at the arrow as he went. Then he fell, and Maco knew he would never get up.

Maco by now had hit the ground. The grass partially shielded him from Mad-Face's aim. Maco whipped another arrow up. With it he missed Mad-Face badly. Mad-Face put a bullet through the lower lobe of Maco's left ear. Maco took half a second longer with his last arrow. Drew back still more. Let it fly.

This time it went straight. Hard. It caught Mad-Face in the belly just above the belt, and sank in a full six inches. Maco saw him hunch forward, with a look of mortal anguish on his face. Mad-Face knew he was bad hit, might die. Insane fear of death hit him.

He shrieked, "Maco, don't shoot again! Help me! I can't die! I can't die!"

He let his gun fall and grabbed crazily at the arrow, as if to pull it out. But he didn't have the strength. If Mad-Face had ever had any true bravery, it was gone now. He was just a terrified man, trying to fight off the death he had earned several times over.

Maco ran to him and eased him to the ground. "Where is the stuff you stole when you robbed the trading post?" he demanded, making Mad-Face feel his truthful answer would be the price of help.

"In a hole in the cliff." With his lips, Indian-fashion, Mad-Face pointed toward a honeycombed section of the red cliff.

Maco said, "We'll try to get a doctor to you, if one will climb a rope ladder up here. You can't be moved off this cliff for a while."

Maco went out to the edge of the cliff and called down to the posse. They could hear Mad-Face, too, shouting for them to go for a doctor. Three of them came up after a long climb—Herbert, Mr. Baylor, and Shep Farrody.

Herbert looked at the dead Noposo, and then at Mad-Face. Then Herbert took out his Colt and aimed it down at the cringing Mad-Face.

"You killed my father," he said. "Now take this from me!"

Mad-Face shrieked out a wretched plea for his life. Then he babbled in pitiful begging.

Herbert was after only one thing, of course, and that was a confession that couldn't be doubted.

Mad-Face told it all, from how he and Noposo had entered the store, to where the money was up there in the hole in the cliff. And Mad-Face lived just eleven weeks more, until he was tried and hanged.

While they waited for a doctor, Herbert held out a hand to Maco. He didn't say one word, but Maco knew what that hand meant. He took it and gripped it hard. He and Herbert both knew that from here on they would be brothers forever.

That evening at dusk Maco halted his horse on the low ridge above his hogan. He felt good once more. He felt very good. He thought of Herbert a lot. He thought of all the white people who this night would know that so many, many Navajos wouldn't betray a friendship. He began to sing:

I walk in good beauty,
In good beauty I walk,
For the world is my home
And its people my brothers.

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Trickery on the Texas

When Clay Jackson needed a five-eighths Cherokee, he knew just how to get one—with a little assistance!

DOWN in the Choctaw Nation of Indian Territory, the little town of Caddo sprawled astraddle of the Texas Road, first called the Osage Trace. No one knew when the old trail had crept south from the Missouri country to Red River, but the town was born shortly after the Five Civilized Tribes were forced to trade their ancient homes east of the Mississippi for raw land and virgin forests in the West.

The old road welcomed the refugees upon their arrival during the years 1828 to 1846. With its branches it served them all — Choctaws, Chickasaws, Seminoles, Creeks and Cherokees — and through treaties between the United States and the Tribes it remained open for white men's commerce across Indian lands. As a cattle trail the Texas Road was old when the Chisholm was born.

Choctaw Joe's Trading Post fronted the road. Business was slow this hot afternoon in July, 1868, and only two men were in the shade of the trader's porch. One was stocky, grizzled, ageless and admittedly tough Choctaw Joe himself; the other lean, dark, young and modestly tough Clay Jackson, cowman and trainer of horses by profession, an outlaw through force of circumstances. Each expected something from the road today.

Joe looked for a freighter with supplies, including barrels of molasses in which were submerged kegs of illegal whisky. Clay expected a fine carriage from down San Antonio way. It would be carrying Jeremiah "Jehovah" Jones, lordly lord of the J Bar, owner of a trail herd now coming north on the Texas Road; and his daughter, Tana, who had the Clay Jackson heart hobbled and sidelined a-plenty. Clay gazed south on the old road, frowning at its emptiness.

Choctaw Joe watched him slyly. "What mostly ails you, Clay, is you're a furriner."

A quick grin replaced the frown. "Me a foreigner? Why, I was born and brought up in Texas and gun run out of Texas before I was twenty-six."

The old-timer nodded wisely. "So now you're a poor maverick in a furrin land. Ain't got nary a country you can call yo' own. Now, take me — I been outlawed here and yander for mighty nigh everything from woman stealin' to murder with malice aforesaid. So what do I do? Ten year back I slide secret into this country and marry me a Indian girl which gets me adopted into the tribe and now I'm a upstandin' citizen of the Choctaw Nation, a independent republic that was maybe two hundred year old when Columbus was a shirt-tailed kid. Take my advice, boy, and get yo'self matrimonially naturalized."

"That's an idea," dryly admitted Jackson, "but the hitch is I've already got a girl—if she'll have me and if her old man doesn't get me shot or hung."

CHOCTAW glared up at him. "Looky here, feller. You ain't seen no girl until you run a eye over my old woman's niece on the nigh side, Kitty Bluebird. What I mean, she's — "

"Maybe not," interrupted Clay, "but

Road

Clay recognized the approaching horse and rider

By CADDO CAMERON

my Texas girl will be here this evening. Wait till you see *her*."

"Too bad," declared Joe. "I've heard tell that you murdered a man over a girl, but I didn't have no idea that it was anything serious. If it's any of my business, which it ain't, let's hear about that woman."

Clay Jackson again looked south on the Texas Road. His thin face hardened momentarily, then he smiled at his thoughts. "Just bend an ear to this," he drawled, "and I'll let you in on some dirty work I'm cooking up. May need your help."

"Elucidate, boy. Me, I'm the daddy of dirty work."

"Jeremiah Jones," began Clay, "has got

two good points. He'll keep his word, regardless, and he's the father of a girl named Tana. He thinks he's God and they call him Jehovah behind his back."

"Sounds bad," observed Choctaw. "Maybe he passed that Jehovah cussedness on to the girl and she's keepin' it under cover until she snares you. Can't never tell about women. They been the cause of bellyaches ever since Mother Eve slipped Old Adam a green apple. Who *is* this Godamighty Jones?"

"He's the man who hazed me out of Texas," continued Jackson. "Agree with him and he'll give you his best horse. Cross him and he'll stomp you into dust if he can. I used to run a little outfit bordering his range southwest of San 'Tonio. One night I ran onto him and two of his men fixing to hang a *Tejano* boy for stealing a horse he didn't steal. I took the kid away from the lynchers. That's Tomas Terreros who rides for me here in The Nation. Jehovah's two men got hurt. He swore he'd put me under sod or run me out of Texas. Pretty soon he sent one of his gunmen to do the job. We shot it out — no witnesses. The other fella was a shade slow. Old — "

"That ain't surprisin'. Go ahead."

"Well, Old Jones bought up some witnesses and got me indicted for murder. If Texas has a political boss, he's it. I didn't have a ghost of a show. I hid out in the brush and quick sold off everything and hit north. Dodged Rangers all the way to Red River."

"Uh-huh, so you swum the Red and made yo'self a maverick. Now, Kitty Bluebird would — "

Clay laughed. "For eighteen months Tana and I have been writing back and forth through a friend. She told me her dad would come north with the next herd he put on the trail. I told her to come along. She did. I've had men scouting that J Bar outfit day and night ever since they crossed the Red six days ago. Got some bad news this morning."

"Did Godamighty Jones get tromped by a stampede, or bit by a cottonmouth, or somethin'?"

Jackson grinned wryly. "No, but I will if I ain't mightly careful. Tana and I figured he didn't know I was in this country. Yesterday she found out that he got onto it several months ago and that's why he came with the herd. She slipped a note to one of my Choctaw boys who was hanging around their camp last night. Now, I'm wondering what the old scalawag is up to."

"That ain't what you'd call good," mused Choctaw Joe. "If you was to hit for the high mountains or a canebrake I'd fetch Kitty Bluebird with some grub and liquor and a preacher, and — "

Clay chuckled. "Much obliged, but Tana said the Old Man would be coming north in the carriage today with her and his bodyguard. They'll lay over here and wait for the herd. I'm waiting for *him.*"

Choctaw cocked a humorous eye at him. "D'you figure to murder Godamighty Jones and run off with the girl and his J Bar outfit? If that's yo' game, make certain to deal me in."

"Well, hardly," drawled Jackson. "But I'm setting a line of traps for him. Likewise, I aim to marry Tana before she gets out of The Nations, and I'll do it in spite of hell and her Old Man himself."

Choctaw Joe nodded with the air of an expert on such matters. "Now, that's what I call fust-rate dirty work."

SOME time later a high-headed foursome of matched bays trotted into Caddo with the Jones carriage, its paint and brightwork showing through a film of trail dust. A *Tejano* with white teeth and a huge sombrero proudly and expertly handled the lines, meanwhile flirting with every girl he saw. The rig halted in a cloud of dust at the stage station some distance south of the trader's store. A number of Indians had gathered there, politely and silently curious, men and women dressed as white people, with the exception of a few moccasined feet.

Clay Jackson tilted his hat to the proper slant. He touched briefly the handle of his six-shooter, and grinned down at Choctaw. "Just trail along with me and

I'll show you a girl that'll make your Kitty Bluebird look like an old crow."

"Cain't hardly believe it."

They walked down a path toward the station porch. "Looky yonder," said Clay cautiously. "That's Sandy Fraser getting out of the coach. First time I ever saw the cuss, but his gotched ear gives him away. He's bad, and thinks he's a sight worse."

"What gotched his ear? Screw worms?"

"No — a female Mexican knife."

Fraser was a short, burly man with a six-shooter tied down on either thigh. The upper half of his left ear was missing. Holding the carriage door open, he offered his hand to a woman inside. Tana Jones ignored him and stepped out, a slender girl in blue alpaca that matched the deep blue of her eyes and went right well with hair the color of ripe sedge grass.

"Mmm-huh," said Choctaw Joe. "Long on looks, but short on what it takes to grind corn and dig snake root."

The girl caught sight of Jackson at once and went eagerly to meet him. "Clay!"

He took both her hands. "Howdy, Sorrel Top!" He dropped one hand, threw an arm around her and kissed her.

"Why, Clay!" she cried breathlessly. "Papa is watching us!"

He kissed her again. "Won't hurt him a particle, honey. He ain't too young to watch a fella kiss a girl."

Tana laughed a little, then whispered seriously, "Did you get my note?"

"Yes, thanks."

"What *are* we going to do?"

"Plenty. Don't you worry, honey."

"Be careful, won't you, Clay?"

"Sure," promised Jackson. He looked past her at a big man who had pried himself from the coach and was giving orders to his driver and a station attendant. Clay grinned with one side of his mouth, and added, "But not *too* careful."

Big was the word for Jeremiah Jones, a florid man in his middle forties with a big brown mustache and a big voice.

"Tana!" he commanded. "Come here!"

The girl flushed with embarrassment in the presence of all these strangers. She lifted her eyes to Clay's as if ashamed to look at him.

He grinned. As Tana turned to answer her father, Clay called out, "She's busy now. You wait there, Jones. I want to talk to you."

Tana gasped. Old Jehovah flushed to the hair and beyond. Surprise struck the cattle king dumb and demoralized him. Mirth showed alarmingly on the faces of Indians. Choctaw Joe chuckled aloud.

Jackson quickly introduced Tana and the trader. "Stay here, honey, and get to know this old reprobate."

Choctaw scowled ferociously, "Git, you furrin maverick!"

JEREMIAH JONES stood squarely in the middle of the station porch with arms folded and jaw set. He didn't carry weapons and often boasted of the fact, but always neglected to explain that he never went away from home without someone who packed one or more guns and knew how to use them. He had once offered Clay Jackson a job as his personal bodyguard and got sore when the offer was refused with some emphasis. Sandy Fraser was near him now, eagerly watchful.

Old Jehovah looked mighty big—made Clay think of the time a buffalo bull had set him afoot on the prairie. Although the lanky horseman ambled along as if life had cut the cake big for him, he was scared clean through-and-through, afraid he had tied onto a critter that would tear him and his rigging apart. If the rich and all-powerful lord of the J Bar had ever taken a licking in any kind of a deal, Jackson had never heard of it. So, how could a two-bit bronc rider hope to bring this old high-roller to grass after big men with money had tried and made a fizzle of it?

Clay shrugged mentally and smiled to himself sort of recklessly. Maybe he was fixing to cut a big gut, but what the hell! He had figured percentages and decided that the stakes justified the bluff. Being an outlaw was kind of exciting,

but there was no future in it. Damned if he wanted any more of it. He wanted to marry Tana and settle down—or, anyhow, marry Tana.

Jackson was gambling that Jones didn't know the Texas Road and the peculiar legal setup in The Nations. Having inherited his wealth, Jones paid others to ride in the dust of his cattle and never before had gone up the trail with a herd. However, he often swore that he knew all the tricks in the business. Clay hoped to take advantage of Jeremiah's conceit and somehow—by hook or crook, clean or dirty—he'd get Old Jehovah's tail in a crack and twist until the cantankerous cuss promised to quash that Texas murder charge he had framed.

Jackson halted, facing the cattleman and within arm's reach of the gunman, just in case. His lazy voice showed no symptoms of his inner excitement.

"Howdy, Jones. How-yah, Fraser."

Old Jehova's face was afire. "I'm *Mister Jones* to the likes of you!"

"Not here, you ain't," drawled Jackson. "Here in The Nations you're just a Texas man named Jones. Kind of a low-down person, too. They say that since you and your crowd crossed into this country, you've busted its laws to smithereens. Down at the Choctaw capitol, Chata Tamaha, they've got a whipping tree for lawbreakers. It ain't far from here, either."

Spectators caught their breath. Jones exploded hoarsely, "You can't talk to me that way! These lousy Wo-haws ain't got no laws and even if they did have, I'd snap my fingers at 'em!"

Indian listeners remained, if possible, even more silent. Their attention was fixed upon Jackson. His thin dark face was hard now, its whimsical humor gone.

"Jones," he declared quietly, "you've got a lot to learn about the rights of other folks and your education is due to commence forthwith and *pronto*. The chief of this district is a big cattleman. I'm his cow-foreman. He and I are pardners in a little horse ranch, too. We've been having hell with you Texas trail drivers. So has everybody else in The Nations. They tell me it's been going on for years. You big drovers behave as if you owned the whole damned country from Red River to Kansas and every hoof and head of Indian stock in it."

Jones put his hands on his hips and teetered back and forth on toes and heels. "So you get run out of a white man's civilized country and go savage. Probably got you a squaw and a blanket and a mess of graybacks by now."

Spectators muttered among themselves. Two neatly-dressed Indian girls walked away. "Watch your language, Jones! Ladies here." Jackson's voice cut. "Compared to some of these educated Indian men and women that you call savages, you're just ignorant trash—all your money, regardless!"

The cattle king had the look of a man who couldn't believe his ears. Again, he was momentarily speechless.

SANDY FRASER cut in. "Jackson, you're a-talkin' some with your mouth. Mister Jones is a friend of mine."

Clay glanced carelessly down at him as if he didn't amount to much. "Be still, Fraser. I'll get around to you. Meantime, if Jones has got a lick of sense he'll listen close to what I'm about to tell him."

The gunman's eyes narrowed dangerously. Jones spoke up, "I'm a-listenin'. Not that I give a damn. Just curious."

Jackson brought out a folded paper. "My boss got me appointed deputy sheriff. Needed a special act of the council because I'm not a citizen, but here it is. It's signed by the principal chief and it carries the Great Seal of The Choctaw Nation. Want to read it?"

"Hell, no! I don't care two whoops if they make you top medicine man."

Clay returned the paper to his pocket. "All right, tomorrow morning I'm going to cut your herd. Likewise—"

"You won't cut my herd! No damned man cuts *my* herd! No J Bar herd has ever been cut on the trail!"

"This one will be," calmly declared Jackson, "and I'll inspect the brands in

your remuda. They tell me you're carrying a mighty big band of saddle stock for the size of your crew."

Old Jeremiah reared back and demanded, "Are *you* callin' *me* a cow and horse thief?"

Dryly, Clay answered, "Just between the two of us, Jones, *I know you are.* As an officer I'll have to prove it. Meantime, you stay here until I get back tomorrow—all of you."

"Like hell I will!" growled the cattleman. "You ain't givin' me no orders."

Jackson turned and beckoned to Choctaw. The trader came quickly, leaving Tana standing alone. "Joe, I'm holding these two men and their driver in Caddo for investigation. You're a citizen of The Nations. I'm deputizing you to see that they stay here until I get back. Call on as many citizens as you need to help you."

Jones and Fraser started to bluster. Clay snapped, "Be still!"

Choctaw Joe scowled at the two men as if he were looking for the best places to aim at. "Won't need but one citizen to help me. She's my old eight-gauge double-bar'l. I keep her loaded to the eyes with buckshot, rusty horseshoe nails and old fish hooks. Me and her—we'll hold 'em."

"Come to think of it, Jones," said Clay, "give us your word that you and your men won't try to leave here and you won't be put under guard."

Old Jehovah frowned at Jackson as if he were mystified, or doubtful, about something. "We'll stay. I figured to do it, anyhow."

Turning away, Clay mopped sweat from his face. He asked himself: *Why in hell is he taking it so easy? What deviltry has he got on the fire?*

The following morning Jackson cut the J Bar herd, changed to a fresh horse at an Indian friend's place near by and rode hell-bent back to Caddo. What did Jones have up his sleeve? That question had tormented Clay ever since he had tangled with the cattleman yesterday. So far he was doing all right, but he wouldn't kid himself. Old Jehovah was plenty tricky and plumb tough.

Jones and Fraser were seated on the stage station porch when Jackson rode up. In the shade of an ancient elm near the Trading Post sat Tana and two pretty Choctaw girls. All three waved at Clay. He touched his hat and stepped down at the rack.

"Did you cut my herd?" Jones boomed out.

Jackson ambled over there. He grinned, and replied, "Yes."

Jones and Fraser got up. Old Jehovah's face blazed and the color spread to the whites of his eyes. "What did Tom do?"

"Your trail boss told me you wouldn't like it, but he didn't put up a fight," answered Clay. "Had too much sense. Tom Wood has got a sight more brains than you have."

Fraser horned in quickly. Jackson suspected that the gunman had orders to pick a quarrel so as to make a shooting seem a personal affair. "Like I said, you talk too much, Jackson, and you know too damned much. We ain't never met up before, but you knew my name. How come? Been sticking your long nose into my business, too?"

Clay looked into the gunman's cold light eyes and felt the excitement of standing within arm's reach of death. He felt fear, too, but poked fun at it. "I knew you by your scent. You pack a smell that—"

VIOLENCE interrupted him. Jackson's hand moved faster by the fractional part of a second that determined the outcome of such deadly encounters. He whipped the barrel of his six-shooter to the stocky gunman's big jaw. There was power in the vicious blow. Fraser's pistol exploded into the floor. The recoil kicked it from his hand. His knees sagged and he slumped in a heap.

Jackson's lean face seemed thinner now, and he had paled slightly around his nostrils. "I won't waste ammunition on your hired hand, Jones, but I'm damned sorry *you* don't pack a gun."

He turned at the sound of rapid foot-

steps—Tana and Choctaw Joe.

"Are you all right, Clay?" cried the girl.

"Sound as a silver dollar, honey," he answered lightly. "Nothing much happened."

Tana looked as though she couldn't believe it. "You mean you didn't get hurt?"

"Nary a scratch," drawled Clay. "Sandy Fraser got a busted jawbone, that's all. Doc Lightfoot will splice it with whang leather and he'll be meaner than ever. Now, I want to make private medicine with your dad. See you after a while."

He turned back to Jones. Two men were picking Fraser up. Astonishment lingered in the cattleman's big face as he watched them carry the insensible gunman into the hotel. Presently, he looked at Jackson. His eyes narrowed calculatingly.

"You're a hard man, Clay, harder than I figured," he declared in a milder tone than he had previously employed. "I like 'em hard. If you'd had the brains to listen to me, I'd have made something out of you. Now, you're just a cussed outlaw, gone Indian."

"Yeah, you like 'em hard," retorted Jackson cynically, "hard towards the other fella. Folks are gathering. Come out to the rack where we can talk. You've got some talking to do."

They moved to the far end of the long hitchrack, nearer the trader's store. Glancing north on the Texas Road, Clay saw a rider rounding a curve coming into town. His heart stumbled. He recognized that tall sorrel with stockinged forelegs, and he knew that the man in the saddle was Deputy Marshal Brian Burke, assigned to this district by the United States marshal at Fort Smith, Arkansas. In criminal matters federal authority was supreme over United States citizens in The Territory, and these marshals could arrest anyone for any crime committed anywhere in the country. Though Burke and Jackson were good friends, there was no telling what would happen if Jones and the officer got together at this critical moment. Silently, Clay cursed his luck.

"Wait here," he told the cattleman. "Back in a minute."

Old Jehovah grunted. He kept an eye on the approaching rider with considerable interest.

Choctaw Joe and Tana had halted on the path, talking to an Indian. Jackson hurried over to them and called the girl aside.

"Don't look," he said rapidly, "but a deputy U. S. marshal is coming down the road. If your dad gets to talk to him right now he can upset everything. Maybe haul me back to Texas or land me in the federal jail at Fort Smith. Tell Choctaw to stop Burke at the store, then you and your Indian girl friends hang onto the cuss until I get through with your dad. This lawman is strong for pretty women."

Tana looked at her father. Her face tightened, and she said quietly, "Go and finish your job, Clay. I'll hold this marshal."

Clay Jackson felt that every pore on his body was oozing sweat when he rejoined the cattleman. He didn't like the crafty glint in Old Jehovah's eye and wondered what caused it.

Jones spoke first. For some reason he was impatient, too. "Come on! Make your talk. Damned if I'll stand here in the sun all day. I'll—" He broke off suddenly, pointing, "Who is that man?"

THOUGH Clay had been watching the rider from the side of his eye, he pretended to look. "A deputy U. S. marshal. Brian Burke is his name. Fine officer. Friend of mine. Glad he's here. I set one of my boys off yesterday to try and find him."

"Why did you want a marshal?"

"Figured I might need him."

Old Jehovah grunted. Choctaw Joe hailed Burke from the store. The deputy swung over to the rack and dismounted there, a tall, lean man with aquiline features, a black mustache and straight black hair that fell to his shoulders in

the fashion of many frontiersmen of the day and region. The trader and three Indian men met him on the porch.

"Yep, I'm glad he got here," lied Clay again. "Good man, Old Brian is, but he's got one hell of a temper. Wait until he hears how you talk about Indians. Those boys are sure to tell him."

Old Jehovah jerked his eyes from the group at the store. "What I said about 'em won't make no difference to him. He's a United States officer."

"Uh-huh, he sure is," drawled Jackson, "and likewise—he's five-eighths Cherokee himself."

"What?"

"Certainly. Can't you tell that from looking at him?"

Jones looked toward the marshal, frowned, looked again. After a moment he snorted and growled, "All right. Make your talk and let's get it over with."

The deputy moved as if to come this way, then Choctaw Joe tied onto his arm and piloted him out to where the girls were sitting.

Clay had to fight to keep his voice level, cold and confident. "My talk is short. Yours had better be good. I cut your herd. Cut a hundred and twenty-five head in well known Choctaw and Chicksaw brands."

"Strays. What the hell! Every trail herd picks 'em up."

"Uh-huh, but ten head had been hair-branded with your road iron. Reckon I showed up before your boys finished that dirty job."

"In *my* road brand?"

"Yes, hair-branded so's not to show a fresh burn."

"That's an infernal lie!" growled Jones.

"I've got plenty witnesses," said Jackson curtly, "besides the critters themselves. And I found ten Choctaw horses in your remuda. Two of 'em belong to the principal chief of The Nations. He won't like that."

Scowling at the ground, Old Jehovah shook his head. "Don't believe it! Don't believe a cussed word of it. What did Tom say?"

Clay didn't answer at once. He had an

[*Turn page*]

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eye on the group under the tree. The deputy was still standing. Tana was standing, too. Burke looked this way, bowed and took a step this way. Tana moved in front of him, talking a blue streak. Hold him, honey, Clay prayed. The deputy bowed again, smiled, circled her and came on. Tana came, too.

Clay Jackson's face was mean now, his fighting face "What Wood says doesn't mean a damned thing. You're his boss. You've been with the herd. You're the thief."

"By the eternal, I'm not a thief!" roared Old Jehovah.

"Howl if you're a mind to," retorted Jackson. "I'm fixed to take you into court and prove that you've been stealing horses, cows and grass."

"Grass?"

"Yeah, grass. You've grazed your stuff far and wide. Some days you haven't moved north a mile. You figure to fatten your cows on Indian grass all the way across The Nations clean to Kansas and get there after the quarantine on Texas cattle lifts in December. So you're a grass thief, too."

"Grass, hell! What's a little grass?"

A PUFF of wind came up the Texas Road. Tana dropped her sunshade. The deputy halted to retrieve it. They tarried for a moment, laughing about something.

Clay talked fast, his voice harsh. "Grass makes beef and beef is money. Another thing, Jones—you've violated Choctaw law by not keeping your herd moving at least eight miles a day."

"You and your damned Indian laws!" But Old Jehovah's big face showed signs of uneasiness.

"Uh-huh, we've got laws. Like this grazing fee of ten cents a head on outside stock. On three thousand head, that'll cost you a plenty."

For what seemed to Clay a hell of a long time, Jones scraped the ground with the toe of a boot and pondered matters. Finally, he said, "Damn!"

Tana and the Marshal arrived then. Her face was a beautiful apology. Jackson and Burke shook hands, passed the time of day and Jones was introduced.

"Oh, yes," said the marshal. "You're the gentleman who wrote Headquarters and asked to have an officer meet you here today or tomorrow. I'm your man, Mister Jones."

Clay looked at Tana, and vice versa. Clay stopped breathing for the time being.

"Uh-h—er—sure!" fumbled Old Jehovah. "I did need an officer to round in the meanest, out-fightin'est fool in The Nations, but he has squared himself with Texas law now, and there ain't a dad-blamed thing against the young scamp. Mighty sorry to have put you out, Marshal. Come up to my room. I pack some powerful fine drinkin' whisky—fo'ty year old if it's a day."

Clay spoke up sternly, "Take care, *Mister* Jones. This is dry country. Strictly against Choctaw and Federal law to—"

"*Law!*" roared Old Jehovah. "Come along, Marshal—you, too, son." . . .

Clay and Tana leaned against the rack and watched them go. When they were a safe distance away she seized his arm, and cried, "Clay Jackson, you darling! How did you do it?"

"Threw a bluff, a big bluff."

"You bluffed my papa?"

"Uh-huh, and framed him."

"You *framed* my papa?"

"Yep," complacently. "Planted horses and doctored cows on him yesterday. Pinned laws on him today."

"Pinned laws? I don't understand."

He grinned at Old Jehovah's broad back. "Well, you see, honey, it's like this. Here in The Nations, Indians can make laws to govern their own people, but they can't enforce them against a white man unless he's an intermarried citizen. Your dad didn't know that."

"Why, Clay! You—you're a—"

"Yep, that's what I am." He watched Deputy Brian Burke follow Old Jehovah into the hotel. "Wonder what that long, tall, old Black Irishman will say when he finds out that I made him a five-eighths Cherokee."

SOME URANIUM!

By Sam Brant

DEAR ATOMIC Energy Commission in Washington:

How you are. I am fine. Have name of Long Shadow. Can read pretty good, write pretty good, although maybe not perfek. Not have to be perfek anyway, have dictionary old missionary fellow leave. Read dictionary all time even when not have anything to look up. Pretty interesting story. The reason Long Shadow write you is this: Go to town other day to stock up on some canned beans, saradines, bacon and so fourth. Some stuff rapped in old newspaper. Come back to cabin, Long Shadow start reading old newspaper. Learn many interesting things. Most interesting thing though is that Atomic Energy Commission in Wash-

ington is looking for Uranium. Pay $10,000 for anyone who find. Long Shadow please to report Atomic Energy Commission in Washington not have to look any more. Long Shadow find. Long Shadow not particular what kind of bills you send to make up $10,000. Long Shadow broad-minded. Yours truly,

Long Shadow.

Dear Mr. Shadow:

The Federal Government has a standing offer of $10,000 to anyone who makes a solid uranium strike. This is, of course, in addition to the royalties that may accrue to him. The thing for you to do is mail us a sample of this matter for assaying. Sincerely,

Alfred G. Clark, Supervisor.
Assaying Division,
Atomic Energy Commission.

Dear Atomic Energy Commission in Washington:

This Uranium solid all right. And how. Pretty too. But do not understand what you mean send sample. Much too pretty to break up in little pieces. Look just right as is. How about sending whole Uranium. What you say?

Long Shadow.

Dear Mr. Shadow:

For assaying purposes it would not be necessary to send more than just a few pounds of the material you believe to be uranium. However, there is no hard and fast rule on this. Our intent is only to eliminate the necessity of sending something overly bulky through the mail. What does this piece of material you believe may be uranium weigh? Sincerely,

Alfred G. Clark, Supervisor.
Assaying Division,
Atomic Energy Commission.

Dear Atomic Energy Commission in Washington:

Long Shadow have you know nothing bulky about Uranium. Look up word in dictionary, see bulky mean oversize figure. Long Shadow have you understand this Uranium have much fine figure. And how. You write how much Uranium weigh. Not know exactly. Perhaps probably maybe 130 pounds. Long Shadow say this though. Every pound of Uranium just right. And how. Yours truly.

Long Shadow.

Dear Mr. Shadow:

Well, of course, as you can see, it would be much simpler to package something weighing a few pounds than the whole 130-pound chunk. However, if you are bound and determined to send the whole thing, I would make no attempt to stop you. I can assure you that the Government is vitally interested in anything that may be uranium. Before you go to any shipping trouble, I would like to ask you this: Are you sure that this material you believe may be uranium gives off the proper radiation to make it a possibility for the genuine article? Have you subjected it to a Geiger counter test? And might I ask where you discovered this mass? I am not asking for the exact locality geographically, since it would not be proper for me to do so at this time, but I am interested from a general topographical point of view. Sincerely,

Alfred G. Clark, Supervisor.
Assaying Division,
Atomic Energy Commission.

Dear Atomic Energy Commission in Washington:

You sure have Long Shadow working overtime looking up things in dictionary this time. First of all, Long Shadow want to say please you not call Uranium chunk or mass. Long Shadow like not that. Like Long Shadow say, this Uranium got very nice form. And how. Long Shadow look up word radiation very careful and you bet this Uranium shine and give off glow like the dictionary say is supposed to do.

Long Shadow go even further. This Uranium, he is much happy to report, also give off sparks. Your right, not exactly Atomic Energy Commission or anybody else's business where I find Uranium, some things happen to a man his own private life; Great White Father in Washington not got to know everything. But I not mind telling you this much. One day not many suns ago Long Shadow on trail back to cabin, see something that catch eye at side of hill. Long Shadow come closer, let out long whistle. Never see anything so pretty as this Uranium in whole life. Not necessary have any kind of white man machine tell him this Uranium. Uranium tell him so. Long Shadow not wish to get in argument about such things with white man, but much simpler this way. Yours truly,

Long Shadow.

Dear Mr. Shadow:

I will first of all acknowledge the fact that uranium is most generally found in the sides of hills and mountains. So that much is in your favor. I also will acknowledge that the Indians always have had a way with minerals, but uranium, being a comparatively new matter of interest, I had felt it would be wiser to test it as far as possible by currently employed methods. However, if you're convinced that you have come across some uranium, by all means send it along to us. Of course, sending along the whole amount, instead of just a sample, is going to run you into considerably more mailing money, but if that's the way you want to do it I am not going to say anything more about it. I shall insist, however, that you put the stuff in a thick heavy crate. Radiation, no matter how encompassed by superfluous matter, can, you know, be dangerous. Sincerely,

Alfred G. Clark, Supervisor.
Assaying Department,
Atomic Energy Commission.

Dear Atomic Energy Commission in Washington:

Have good friend, Mr. George Smith, who live somewhere out these parts who has airplane of own. Long Shadow do favor sometime for Mr. George Smith and Mr. George Smith say, Long Shadow, if I can ever do you a favor, let me know. So other day Long Shadow say to Mr. George Smith, Mr. George Smith, Long Shadow know you big business man, go to many places in the sky in your airplane, you ever go to Washington. Mr. George Smith say, yes, I go to Washington every now and then, in fact, I am going there in a couple of weeks. So Long Shadow say, maybe you take something to Washington for Long Shadow when you go, it weigh 130 pounds, but Long Shadow have all crate up for you, if you can do. Mr. George Smith say, sure, I glad to do this for you Long Shadow, I can handle the weight all right. He say he will land by my cabin and take crate on his way to Washington. Long Shadow say, Fine, Mr. George Smith. Long Shadow appreciate.

Long Shadow will write you again, let you know for sure when airplane leave here with Uranium. Long Shadow admit radiation maybe dangerous all right. Sparks Uranium give off sure make Long Shadow feel funny all over all right. And how. So maybe it all right to put Uranium in crate. But Long Shadow not like part where you call Uranium stuff, also superfulous matter. Next time you say something like that about Uranium Long Shadow come personal to Washington, punch Atomic Energy Commission in nose. Long Shadow has spoken. Yours truly,

Long Shadow.

Dear Mr. Shadow:

I am very sorry if I have said anything that might have offended you. I can assure you that the Federal Government sets as much store by uranium as you do. Without uranium we could win no modern war. I look forward with unusual interest to your shipment. Sincerely.

Alfred G. Clark, Supervisor.

Assaying Department,
Atomic Energy Commission.

Dear Atomic Energy Commission in Washington:

Long Shadow not think about it like that before, but Long Shadow guess Uranium could win war all right. She can stir up men plenty, no doubt about that.

Real reason Long Shadow write you now is not just to tell you he glad you finally say something nice about Uranium, but to report like Long Shadow say he do that Mr. George Smith take off in airplane today to fly in sky to Washington with Uranium. He nice fellow all right. After him and Long Shadow put crate in airplane, Long Shadow say, One thing Long Shadow forget to mention; would you mind lifting up lid of crate once in awhile and stick in sandwich, also glass of water, also leave open lid just a little bit. Mr. George Smith seem very surprise, keep looking at crate in airplane, but say he guess he would do that all right, and Long Shadow say, Fine! You fine fellow, Mr. George Smith. Here is bag full of sandwiches. Mr. George Smith take it but keep looking at crate, and he say, Might I ask, mostly out of curiosity, what you have in crate. Then Long Shadow say, It is something Long Shadow find by hillside one day—girl by the name of Uranium. Mr. George Smith say, I don't want you to think I mind this at all, but why put her in a crate like this.

Long Shadow shrug a little, say: That mostly Great White Father idea in Washington. Very interested in seeing Uranium, say better put in crate. Long Shadow not argue too much about it; think better put in crate then send in pieces, like Great White Father in Washington first say. Mr. George Smith shake head very sadly, sigh and say, I always knew Washington was all fouled up in red tape and kept getting worse, but I never knew thing come to his pass yet, shipping citizens in crates. Mr. George Smith still shaking head when him, airplane, crate and Uranium fly off into sky.

This is about all Long Shadow has to write. Only one thing you remember please: No matter how many sparks Uranium radiate off, you not get fresh with her. She Long Shadow girlfriend. You can keep long enough to win war but please send back right away afterwards. She make Long Shadow good squaw. Yours truly.

Long Shadow.

P. S. Please send back crate too. Make good place for papooses.

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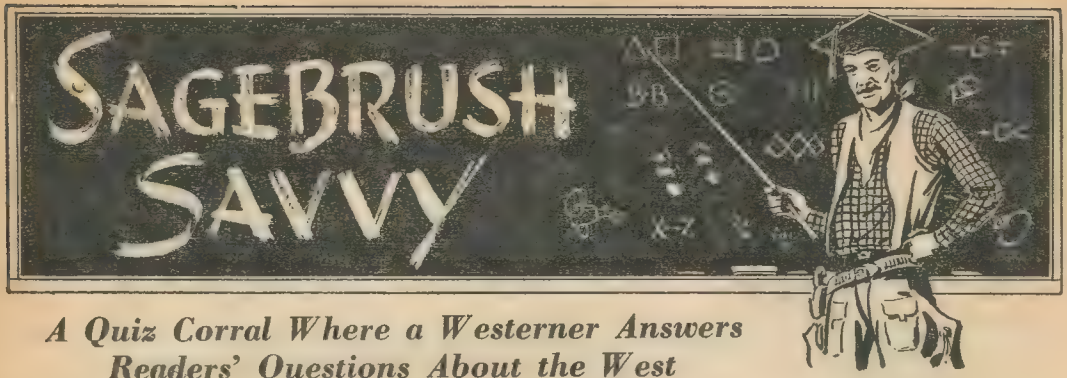

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Will coyotes crossbreed with dogs?—A. McL. (Tenn.)

A.—Yes, though it does not happen often.

Q.—While out west last summer a friend of mine says he actually saw a mounted jackrabbit head with horns. Was this real or a fake?—W. W. (N. J.)

A.—A fake. It is easy for a good taxidermist to mount the head skin of a jackrabbit with small deer horns and make it look "natural," and a good many western saloons have such mounts on their walls for a gag. So far as I know no jackrabbit ever grew horns.

Q.—Who was Buckshot Roberts?—G. H. H. (Wis.)

A.—A former Texas Ranger, but at that time a small ranchman, who was killed by Billy the Kid and his gang after putting up a terrific singlehanded fight, killing one man and wounding two others, in what came to be known as the Battle of Blazer's Mill, during the Lincoln County Cattle War in New Mexico.

Q.—Are mesquite beans good to eat? F.R.A. (Minn.)

A.—Not very. Indians used to make a pasty meal out of them and Texas longhorn cattle fed on them a lot. They have nourishment in them, but also some qualities not too good for the human stomach, as well as a none too pleasing flavor. At least I don't like 'em!

Q.—I have read that at the close of the Civil War there were three or four million head of longhorn cattle running more or less wild in Texas. That sounds like an awful lot of cattle—J.W.H. (Ill.)

A.—It was an awful lot of cattle, and in some ways a lot of awful cattle—but they were there, about three and a half million of them, and gathering, branding and driving them to market is what started this cowboy business.

Q.—Is a loafer the same as a lobo?—M.M.S. (Ark.)

A.—Yes. Lobo is the Spanish word for wolf, applied particularly to the big gray wolf, and some non-Spanish Texans 'way back yonder evidently mis-heard Mexican *vaqueros* and thought they said "loafer", so that's what they started calling the gray wolf, and the name stuck.

Q.—Where is Hermit's Peak and why is it so called?—Askit (Okla.)

A.—A 10,500 foot granite cliff-head about 20 miles northwest of Las Vegas, New Mexico and visible for a hundred miles around, is called Hermit's Peak because an old Italian religious hermit lived in a cave near its crest back in the 1860's. The mountain had formerly been called Cerro del Tecolote, which means Owl Peak. You can see it from U. S. Highways 85 and 66 through New Mexico.

Q.—Who were the best ropers, Texas cowboys or California *vaqueros*?—Tex (Tex.)

A.—Now why would a Texican ask me that? Spanish *vaqueros* of California could do things with their long rawhide *reatas* that no Texas cowboy could match with his shorter Manila hemp, but when a critter had to be caught the Texas cowboy caught it—and so did the Californio—which was what really counted.

—S. Omar Barker

GUNMAN'S GOAL

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by
LESLIE ERNENWEIN

CLAY BENTON came to the weather-warped stage station at noon, observing how small and desolate it was against the vast sweep of brush-blotched desert and the timbered mountains that rose beyond it. This shabby, forlorn place reminded him how threadbare his clothing was and how few dollars remained in his pocket. He had turned down a riding job three hours ago.

"I'll have to find something soon," he told himself.

All Marshal Clay Benton's fine dreams would go up in gunsmoke if it came to a showdown!

Benton dismounted at the windmill watering-trough and stood there while his tired horse drank. He was tall and lean, and he looked a bit older than his twenty-seven years.

The station hostler came out, walking with an old man's reluctance.

"Dished up a plate of frijoles for you," he said to Benton sourly. "They're gittin' cold."

"Gracias," Benton said.

He ate the frugal meal in appreciative silence. "Anyone hiring cowhands hereabouts?" Benton asked.

The old man glanced

speculatively at Benton's gunless hip and observed the faint pattern a holster had once made against the faded California pants.

"Yeah," he said, "if you've got a gun stowed away in your war bag. Breed Riley is fixing to take a slice of the Dragoon Mountain range away from the high country outfits. He's hiring every drifter comes along. Paying gun wages."

"So that's why he offered me a job this morning," Benton mused. He shaped up a cigarette and lit it. "I've had my fill of fighting. Three years of it. Too much." Climbing into the saddle, Benton asked, "How far to the next town?"

"Twenty miles, the last ten straight up," the hostler said. "It's called Junction."

Benton rode on, tilting his hat brim against the sun's brassy glare and smoking his cigarette down until it burned his fingers. It was ironical, he reflected, that a man who'd earned high wages for three years should be forced to economize on tobacco, food and clothing.

There was irony, too, in the fact that the only work he could find would be gunsmoke work. It was enough to make a man discard every dream he'd ever had of having his own home and all that went with it.

For a time, as he rode mile after dusty mile through the desert's scorching heat, Clay Benton's dismal thoughts were like bickering companions nagging at his mind and clawing at the thin fabric of his resolutions.

WHAT good was it for a man to strive against the strong tide of circumstances? He had done that for three years and had made a dream come true. But that was no sign he could do it again. Perhaps one dream fulfilled was all he was entitled to. Maybe he was a witless fool to try for another.

Benton shrugged. Taking a wrinkled letter from his pocket, he read it in the leisurely fashion of a man savoring a familiar and precious thing. The letter was from his sister, Mary.

It said:

"Thanks to you and all the money you've sent so regularly for so long, I am completely cured. And here is more good news, Clay darling. I've met the most wonderful man in the world, and we are to be married soon."

A whimsical smile eased Benton's long lips. Little Mary was well again after tragic years of illness. His dream for her had come true—gloriously, miraculously true.

Yet there'd been many a time when it had seemed hopeless, when only a stubborn, frantically nourished faith had kept his hope alive. Thinking of that now, Benton grinned. Perhaps he could do it again—for himself. So thinking, he straightened in the saddle.

Later, when he'd climbed high into the mountains and come finally to Junction, he banished the bickering companions of doubt and loneliness. There'd be some sort of job in this town for him, some honest toil a man could do, and he could still retain his hope for a homestead in the hills.

After that, sooner or later, he'd meet the girl who was meant for him. The girl whose image he had seen in many a campfire on lonely nights.

Benton dismounted at Lambert's Livery. When his horse had been stabled, he stood in the barn's doorway, his glance traveling casually along Junction's wide main thoroughfare. This town, he reflected, looked no different from a score of others he'd ridden through.

It had the same unlovely scatteration of 'dobe and false-fronted frame buildings, the same pungent odors of a blacksmith's forge, cattle pens and wood smoke.

Recalling that Trail Town had often held this same air of peaceful tranquillity between recurring storms of violence, Benton wondered how much wild carousing and disorder broke out here on Saturday nights. There was a jail just east of the Odd Fellows Hall, but he observed no badge-toter on Main Street.

The eastbound stage rolled away from the Wells Fargo office, sun-sparkled dust cascading like water from its turning wheels. A man rushed out of the Palace Hotel and shouted at the rig.

"Hey, Pegleg—Pegleg Pierce!"

The driver pulled up, waited for the man to climb aboard. Afterward, as the stage passed Slade's Café, Pegleg Pierce waved to a blond-haired girl who stood in the restaurant doorway, smiling up at him.

It was a strange thing, a startling thing. Until this moment Junction had seemed no different from any other town to Clay Benton. But now, gazing at that girl and seeing the late sunlight put a sorrel sheen on her hair and tint her oval face with peachbloom loveliness, he was aware of an abrupt change.

So urgent was his sense of change that he smiled without knowing he smiled. He stood staring at the girl until the liveryman beside him asked wonderingly:

"You seen her somewhere before?"

Benton shook his head. "What's her name?"

"Linda Blake," the liveryman, Jake Lambert, said. "She's got no time for drifters, even if she is a waitress."

"So?" Benton mused, watching until Linda Blake went into the cafe. "The exact image of all a woman should be."

"What's that?" Lambert asked. "What kind of image you say?"

"A campfire image," Benton said.

Shouldering his war bag, he walked to the Palace Hotel in the absent-minded way of a man not quite awake.

He entered the hotel and crossed the lobby to where the owner, John Stuart, stood beside the desk with his ten-year-old son, Jeff. It was odd that Benton didn't notice the freckle-faced boy at all, for he liked youngsters, and they invariably liked him. But now his mind was filled with the remembered loveliness of Linda Blake and with the anticipation of securing peaceful employment in this town.

He put down his duffel and signed the ink-stained register with a pen that scratched badly.

"You must've borrowed this writing tool from the post office or Wells Fargo," he said to Stuart.

The bald-headed proprietor shrugged.

"Pens are like livery horses," Stuart said. "They're spoiled by heavy-handed galoots in a hurry." Then he glanced at the register and asked abruptly, "Are you the real Clay Benton? The man who tamed Trail City?"

Benton nodded.

Young Jeff let out a whoop. "Gee, Clay Benton!"

The plain note of hero worship in the boy's voice brought a self-mocking smile to Benton's lips.

"I'm not bragging about it, son," Benton said.

Jeff's wide-eyed glance shifted to Benton's barren hip.

"I'd sure like to see the gun you killed all them wild ones with."

"Well," Benton said, "I'll make a deal. You tote a pitcher of hot water up to my room, and I'll show you my gun."

JEFF'S broad smile revealed a missing tooth and twin dimples in his cheeks.

"It's a deal," he declared, hurrying off toward the kitchen. "I'll be up there in a jiffy."

"You just staying the night?" John Stuart asked.

Benton picked up his war bag. "I hope to stay longer."

He noticed a well-oiled Winchester on the Texas longhorn rack above the desk. Then he went up the stairway, strongly conscious of Stuart's inquisitive eyes. The hotel proprietor, he guessed, wasn't pleased at his presence here. John Stuart had the look of a strict and respectable man. He'd be remembering all the exaggerated rumors and reports that had come out of Trail City.

Benton was untying his war bag when young Jeff came in with a pitcher of steaming hot water.

"Here she is." Jeff placed the pitcher on a washstand.

"And here," Benton said, taking his gun from its oiled wrappings, "is my six-shooter."

The boy's eyes popped. He touched the greased cylinder with a stubby forefinger. "Is it a Peacemaker?" he asked.

"No. It's a Walker model. Best Colt ever made."

Jeff stroked the smooth hickory handle. "Didn't you cut any notches for all them outlaws you killed?" he asked.

Benton shook his head. "What's your name, son?"

"Jeff Brett Stuart. I'm named after my two uncles, Jeff and Brett. They were both in the Sixth Texas Cavalry with Sul Ross, and they both got killed. Uncle Brett was a great one with guns. He could shoot better on horseback than Dad can afoot. The only gun Dad owns is that Winchester on the lobby rack. He uses it for deer hunting. He never owned a pistol. Says a feller shouldn't tote one unless he intends to use it."

"Your father is right," Benton said and wrapped up his gun. "That's why I don't wear mine any more."

That didn't make sense to Jeff. He eyed Benton wonderingly.

"But supposin' some tough hombre should tromp on your toes? You'd need it then, wouldn't you?"

Benton shrugged. "I'll take care of that when the time comes." Then he added in friendly fashion, "I'm going to shave and wash up, Jeff. I'll see you downstairs after a bit."

It was a full hour before supper when Clay Benton climbed onto a stool in Slade's Cafe and had his first close look at Linda Blake.

She stood straight and medium tall behind the counter, her oval face showing him the calm pleasantness of a self-reliant girl thoroughly at ease in meeting strangers in this public place.

Her honey-hued hair was drawn back with artless simplicity to a neat coil at the nape of her neck. Her eyes were the warmest blue Clay had ever seen, and they met his glance without wavering. Yet there was no hint of boldness in them.

"Our regular supper isn't ready," she said quietly. "Would you like a steak and fried potatoes?"

Benton nodded. Watching her walk back to the kitchen, he saw how gracefully she moved. She was, he thought, as perfectly proportioned as a girl could be. The soft, smooth contours of her face were duplicated in the womanly curves of her supple body. Even the tone of her voice, casual and impersonal as it had been, held a richness.

As Benton watched her bring his meal from the kitchen, he realized she was all a man would ever want in a woman.

Recalling what the liveryman had said about drifters and guessing that numerous saddle tramps had attempted to force their romantic notions on her, Benton offered no more than common courtesy as he ate his meal and paid for it.

There'd be plenty of time to let her know what his intentions were. He would do it in a proper and fitting way. It didn't occur to him that she might not be free to accept his attentions. He hadn't even thought to look at her left hand to see if she wore a wedding ring.

All he knew was that part of his dream had come true. Now he had to get a job and make the rest of it materialize. So he thought!

But there was to come a time, and soon, when Clay Benton would know it wasn't as simple as that.

WHEN he went into the Acme Bar, he was filled with a sense of well-being and sturdy confidence for the first time since leaving Trail City two months ago.

The saloon, like the restaurant was practically deserted. The waiter, "Suds" Smith, stood behind the rosewood bar. One customer sat at a poker table, idly playing solitaire and occasionally pouring himself a drink. A swamper was sweeping the floor.

"What'll it be, Mister Benton," Smith inquired with the exact degree of respect which most bartenders show celebrated badge-toters.

"A cigar," Benton said, smiling a little at the thought of how quickly word of his presence had crossed Main Street. "Do you know of anyone who could use an ambitious man at a job of work?"

"Well now," Smith mused, thinking about this and plainly surprised, "I guess there's two or three outfits would be glad to hire you." He glanced at the poker table. "There," he said, lowering his voice to a confidential murmur, "is one of the reasons. Red Payette. Him and the rest of Breed Riley's bunch are causing plenty trouble back in the hills."

Benton explained that he wanted a town job, not saying why.

"Anything at all, just so it pays a day's wages."

"I don't know of anything offhand," Smith said, "but I'll do a little inquiring when my customers come in this evening." At this instant, the snaggle-toothed old swamper swept around the poker table and Red Payette snarled viciously:

"Keep your filthy, stinking broom off my new boots!"

"I scarcely touched 'em," the swamper whined.

He was dodging back when Payette hit him hard in the face.

"Don't call me a liar, you old billy goat!" the redhead raged.

He was aiming a kick at the groveling oldster when Clay Benton grabbed him from behind.

Even as he snatched Payette's gun from holster and yanked him around, Benton realized that he was acting on pure impulse. This, he thought, fleetingly, was the first foolish move he'd made since turning in his badge at Trail City.

It was none of his affair and he had no legal reason to interfere. Worse than that, it was a wide open break in his peaceful resolutions. It threatened the very core of his crusade for a decent, gunless future.

All this occurred to Benton in the hushed moment that Payette's startled eyes peered up at him.

"Who are you?" the redhead demanded.

Benton stuck the man's gun inside his belt.

"I'm the gent who took your thunder pole," he said quietly, feeling the familiar strain of this and, from long habit, showing no sign of it. "Next time you hit an old man, be sure there's no one around that might pistol-whip you."

"So you're tough," Payette scoffed brazenly. He strode to the batwing door and stopped to speak. "I'm going to buy a gun at the mercantile. I'll come back and shoot you to ribbons."

Benton walked over to him, some of his peaceful resolutions melting at this man's cocksure tone.

"Don't bother to buy a new gun," he said, giving Payette a stiff-armed shove that sent him outside to the plank walk. "I'll leave yours at the hotel desk."

Seething resentment flamed bright in Payette's eyes.

"You best be wearing one yourself next time you show on Main Street," he warned. "And I'll be waiting until you do."

"Don't wait too long," Benton said drily. "You might catch cold."

Benton then crossed the street to the hotel. He thought irritably: I'm a fool if there ever was one. He handed the gun to John Stuart at the desk.

"Payette will be over after it," Benton said and went upstairs.

From the front window of his room, he saw young Jeff come from the mercantile. The boy was chewing on a long stick of licorice candy, and that reminded Benton of his own boyhood. He had liked licorice and still did. His cowman father had chewed tobacco.

Young Clay Benton had made believe the black candy was "chawin' tobacker," and he had aped his father's habit of lumping it in his cheek. Everything had been fine in those days, before his mother and father were killed in a runaway. Afterwards, when he and Mary had had to shift for themselves, it had been plenty tough.

As Jeff turned in at the hotel, Benton saw Red Payette come across the street from the saloon. Red, Benton reckoned, had taken time for another drink or two. His blocky face was flushed and rutted by a scowl.

Watching him walk up to the veranda steps, Benton wondered how fast he was

with a gun. Would the man wait for a shootout, as he'd bragged?

BENTON was worrying about it when he went out into the hallway and stood at the top of the stairway well. He heard Payette's heavy steps across the lobby floor.

"Suds Smith tells me it was Clay Benton took my gun away," Payette's voice said. "Is that right?"

"Yes," Stuart responded.

Then Jeff spoke up. "I guess Clay Benton is the bravest man that ever stepped foot in Junction. He's the fastest shooter that ever lived."

Payette muttered something that Benton didn't catch. Then there was the thud of his new boots across the lobby floor, going out.

Benton went back to his room. He stood again at the window, wondering if Payette would wait for him and hoping he wouldn't.

Benton saw the redhead tromp back across the wheel-churned dust. He stopped at the hitchrack in front of the saloon, glanced at his slack-hipped horse, and then looked at Suds Smith who was coming along the sidewalk with Sol Mandel, who owned the mercantile and was Junction's mayor. The two men stopped in front of Slade's Café, talking with the fat restaurant proprietor, who stood on the stoop.

Seeing all this, and guessing what it meant, Clay Benton smiled thinly. Junction, he thought, was waiting for a show. The stage was set and the audience was wondering when the act would go on. This was as familiar to him as an old joke told at roundups, and as humorless.

Red Payette leaned against the hitchrack, absently shaping a cigarette. He kept glancing toward the hotel. He lit his cigarette, nudged his gun up in its half-breed holster, and expelled a long drag of smoke through his nostrils.

He looked now, Benton thought, like a man who would wait all day—and all night, if it took that long.

[*Turn page*]

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Benton saw himself betrayed by his own rash impulse to protect a defenseless old man, a saloon swamper he'd never so much as spoken to and whose name he didn't know. After all these weeks of keeping his gun wrapped up in his bedroll, of strictly controlling his temper and turning down anything that looked like gunwork, he had built the makings of a gunfight in one moment's time.

Benton scowled darkly when he saw Payette suddenly toss his cigarette to the dust and climb into his saddle. The redhead was leaving town!

For the first time in his life Clay Benton was thankful for the notoriety his badge-toting fights in Trail City had brought him. Red Payette, he guessed, had been thinking about those published stories of a town tamer. His imagination had got the better of him.

Benton grinned. He lit up the cigar he'd bought at the saloon.

He was watching a smoke ring drift tenuously toward the ceiling when Sol Mandel appeared in the doorway of his room.

"I've come to offer you a job as our town marshal," the mayor announced. "We've been without one since Ed Slack got killed a month ago. Ed was just a medium hand with a gun, and the wild ones knew it. With you, Mister Benton, it would be different. They'd shy clear of you, like Payette did just now. Suds Smith says you want a town job. Well, we've talked it over, and we want you to wear our marshal badge."

Benton frowned, not liking this at all.

"I appreciate the offer but I'd rather do something else. Anything else. I've had my fill of fighting. There would be work here for a man who isn't too particular, just so he doesn't have to use a gun. Guess I'll look around a bit."

"We'll pay more than any other job you'd get," Mandel said, plainly disappointed. "Will you take on the badge in case you don't find anything else?"

Benton thought about this for a long moment, remembering how low his funds were, and how urgently he wanted to remain in Junction.

"A man has to eat," he finally said.

He wondered why Mandel looked so pleased when he went out.

By noon the next day, Benton had asked for work in every place of business in town. Then he knew the reason for Mandell's satisfied smile.

Benton had received polite, almost cheerful, refusals at each place he tried. The mayor, he figured, had paved the way for all those polite rejections.

Benton was examining his thin sheaf of dollar bills, wondering how long he could make them last, when he saw Linda Blake standing in the restaurant doorway, talking to Mrs. Stuart. The sight of her strongly stirred him. Noon's overhead sun made a golden halo of her hair and emphasized the lovely contours of her face against which her long lashes made their delicate patterns of shadow.

THIS was the moment when Clay Benton weighed his dislike for a law badge, comparing it with his need to be near Linda Blake. Deliberately, stubbornly, he recalled every disagreeable task the marshal job entailed.

There'd be hilarious cowboys to subdue on Saturday nights, inebriates to tote to jail, drifters and toughs and tinhorn gamblers to watch. Sooner or later there would be a wild one willing to risk his hide for a chance to make a big brag. Like that young buck in Trail City, feeling bigger than Billy-be-damn one moment and then never feeling anything again.

That was the part Clay Benton dreaded —the utter, unchangeable finality of it.

Despite these dismal memories, he walked to Mandel's Mercantile.

"I'll take the job," he said to the mayor.

"Fine, fine!" Mandel exclaimed. "I'm glad you changed your mind."

"I didn't," Benton said flatly. "A man has to eat."

During the next three days, Clay Benton walked the streets of Junction with his fingers crossed, hoping for the best and expecting the worst.

His official hours of duty were from two o'clock in the afternoon until two o'clock in the morning, but it was generally understood that in case of emergency he could be called at any time.

On the second day, the trail crew of the Bootjack Ranch corralled a beef herd at the cattle pens just before dark and proceeded to celebrate the night at the Acme Bar. They got noisy but they accepted Benton's warning against firing their guns in town, and there was no real disturbance of Main Street's peace.

Three times each day Benton sat on a stool at Slade's Cafe, hugely enjoying the privilege of seeing Linda Blake at these regular intervals. On the fourth day she gave him a comradely smile when he came in. She called him "Marshal Clay."

That evening, while he purposely lingered over his supper until the other customers had departed, he asked her opinion of homestead land in the Owlhoot Hills north of Junction.

She seemed genuinely surprised that he should be considering such a future.

"I thought famous lawmen always kept wearing the badge until they died," she said.

"Not me, ma'am. I'm going to have a homestead. I've already talked with the land agents about it."

"That's what I wanted Jack to do," she said. "But he wouldn't listen to me." Sadness brought a brief change to her eyes, and she added, "Perhaps he will be different when he comes back."

The thought came to Benton that this Jack she mentioned might be her husband. That possibility was like a blow in the face.

"Is—is Jack your brother?" he asked haltingly, in the way of a man dreading the answer.

"Yes," Linda said, and her eyes were shining. "He'll be back any day. I can scarcely wait, now the time is so near."

Clay Benton grinned. "I'm sure glad to hear it." He offered to escort her home. "Part of my job," he explained soberly.

"How nice," she said, taking his arm.

[*Turn page*]

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"Only nice thing about the job," he agreed.

She lived alone in a little house on Residential Avenue. The street was dark. He could not see her face when she said good night at the front gate, but he knew she was smiling. He could tell it by the soft, sweet tone of her voice.

WHEN he got back to the hotel, young Jeff Stuart was sitting on the veranda steps.

"So you've got a girl," the boy said censuringly.

Benton sat down beside him. "I hope so," he admitted. "I sure hope so."

"Gosh," Jeff muttered, putting a full cargo of boyish disgust into that single word. "Do you know about her brother?"

Benton shook his head.

"Jack Blake," Jeff announced, "is in Yuma Prison. Him and two other galoots got caught altering the brand of a Bootjack calf."

"So?" Benton said, understanding why sadness had showed in Linda's eyes.

"I guess you wouldn't want to honeyfuss around a girl who's got a brother like that, would you?" Jeff asked.

"Well now," Benton reasoned, "you can't blame Miss Linda for what her brother did. That wouldn't be fair, Jeff."

"Mebbe not," the boy admitted grudgingly. "But it don't seem fittin' for a famous town-tamer to be sashaying around with girls."

Benton patted Jeff's shoulder in comradely fashion. "Don't you worry about it, son."

On his first Sunday in Junction the new marshal attended church, which was an unusual thing in itself. That and the fact he accompanied Linda Blake stirred up considerable talk. But Benton wasn't aware of it. He was as happy as a man could be.

That afternoon, when Linda shared the seat of a livery rig which Benton drove up the Owlhoot Hills road, she seemed to share this happiness.

It was ironical that Jack Blake should arrive in Junction the very next day, and

that Benton should be sitting on the veranda with young Jeff at the time.

"That's him!" Jeff exclaimed. "That's Jack Blake getting out of the stage!"

Benton saw a tall, blond-haired man step down to the sidewalk. Benton thought: He looks like Linda, except for his eyes. Jack's eyes weren't the deep, warm blue of his sister's. They were a sleety gray, and as he gave Main Street a questing consideration, they looked cold and brittle as broken glass.

"I'll bet two bits he goes to Slade's Cafe first thing and borrows money from Miss Linda," Jeff said. "Dad says that's what he always did when he lost in a poker game."

Benton got up, wanting to hear no more gossip about Linda's brother. He went to the jail and sat for a time on the stoop, thinking about Jack Blake and wondering how the man's return would affect the fine plans Benton and Linda had made yesterday.

Recalling the wild, sweet flavor of her lips when he had kissed her good-night, and how she'd said, "I can't give you an answer until Jack comes home," Benton felt an odd mixture of joyful anticipation and nagging worry.

When the marshal went to the cafe for supper at the usual early hour, Jack Blake was sitting at the deserted counter, conversing with Linda. With a simle she introduced him to Benton.

"Clay is planning to build a homestead up in the hills soon," she added.

Benton offered his hand. Blake ignored it.

"I don't cotton to law dogs none at all," he said and strode out of the cafe.

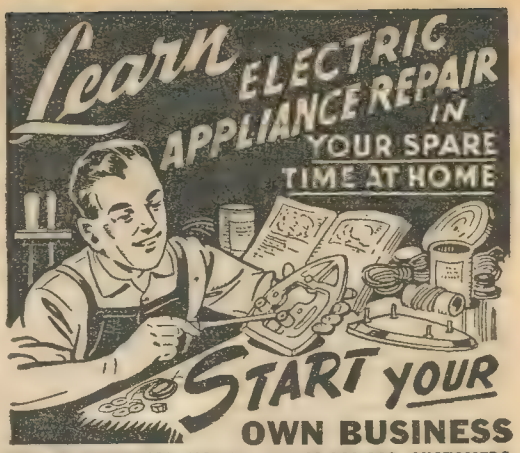
Benton shrugged, seeing the frightened, fearful expression in Linda's eyes.

"He hasn't changed," Linda said sadly. "He's worse than when he went away."

She was misty-eyed as she went to the kitchen for Benton's supper.

This was at four o'clock. One hour later Red Payette and Tate Goll rode into town. The two Riley riders shook hands with Jack Blake on the Acme veranda, then

[*Turn page*]



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pushed through the batwing doors with the air of men bent on celebration.

Watching this reunion from the Palace steps, Clay Benton felt a chilling apprehension. Jack Blake was tougher than Payette. If trouble came, Blake might not run away from it, as Payette had.

The import of that was like a weight on Benton's shoulders. It tightened all his muscles and made him curse the trick of fate that had caused him to accept a marshal's job here.

He was grimly reviewing the peculiar circumstances that had brought him to this dismal moment when a gun's racketing explosion came from the saloon. The sound was instantly followed by the tinkle of shattered glass.

YOUNG Jeff Stuart rushed out of the hotel lobby, his boyish, high-pitched voice demanding excitedly to know what had happened. Over at the mercantile, Sol Mandel came to the doorway. All along the street people peered at the saloon and at Marshal Clay Benton, who walked across the wide dust without hurry and without hesitation.

Although he didn't glance toward the cafe, Benton knew that Linda would be watching, too.

When Benton stepped through the barroom doors, he saw at once how it was to be, and he knew beyond shadow of doubt that the shot which had shattered the bar mirror had been fired deliberately to get him in here. For the three riders were waiting, all facing him and grinning brazenly.

Stopping just inside the doors, Benton stared at them. "Who fired that gun?" he asked.

"Me," Jack Blake said instantly. "What you figurin' to do about it, badge-toter?"

With the thought of Linda uppermost in his mind, Benton replied in a controlled and casual voice.

"I'm going to give you ten minutes to pay Smith for the damage and ride out of town."

"Supposin' I don't?" Blake asked.

"Then I'll arrest you on a charge of

malicious mischief," Benton said flatly and turned back to the batwings.

"I got a mind to shoot your hat off, law dog, just to watch you pick it up," Blake taunted.

Benton knew then that Blake was intoxicated. And Benton also knew what he should do. But because waiting had worked successfully with Red Payette, he shrugged and went on across the street.

Arresting Linda's brother would be a sorry chore at best. If Blake forced a shoot-out, it would be a calamity. Linda would never marry the man who had killed her brother. That's what a showdown would mean.

John Stuart was standing on the Palace veranda with young Jeff

"Blake starting trouble already?" Stuart asked, and when Benton nodded, the hotel proprietor said grimly, "Jack was never any good, and he never will be. You might as well understand that right now, Marshal."

At that exact instant, a bullet whanged past Clay Benton. He heard a sickening sound of impact and saw little Jeff jerk spasmodically. Benton was remotely aware of the blast behind him. But his entire interest was concerned with catching Jeff and rushing into the hotel with him. He heard Mrs. Stuart's piercing scream when she saw the red on her boy's shirt.

Benton gently lowered Jeff to a leather couch in the lobby. The boy's mother kneeled, sobbing, beside him. There was a throat-clutching interval when Jeff's pale, freckled face seemed lifeless. The boy didn't seem to be breathing at all.

Then John Stuart came rushing in with Doc Endicott.

"Don't let my boy die, Doc—don't let him die!" Stuart cried.

Benton turned away, knowing with terrible certainty that he was responsible, that his dread of killing Jack Blake had resulted in this. He hadn't expected Blake to shoot at him while his back was turned. Missing him, Blake had hit little Jeff.

Benton shivered, remembering with

[*Turn page*]

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awful clarity how the bullet's impact had sounded. Remorse and regret slugged through him as he crossed the veranda.

Then, as the marshal saw Jack Blake brazenly waiting with Payette and Goll across the street, Benton did a strange thing. He smiled. But there was no mirth in it, no humor. It was the self-mocking smile of a man who was discarding his dreams.

Here, Benton knew, was the deal he'd dreaded. This was the inevitable climax to every marshal's career—the dismal, dreary moment when he had to kill or be killed. Here was the gunman's goal.

"I didn't mean to hit the kid," Blake called in a thickly-tongued voice. "I was just funning with a yeller-bellied law dog."

There was no sign of regret in Blake's tone or in his cold, bold eyes. It didn't seem possible that so callous a brute could be Linda's brother.

Then Benton glimpsed Linda standing in the restaurant doorway with her hands clasped tightly across her bosom. Her eyes seemed strangely dark against the pallor of her face.

Benton thought: She'll see me shoot her brother, and she'll never forget it!

Clay Benton made one final futile effort to avoid the thing he dreaded. Walking toward Blake, he spoke flatly.

"You're under arrest. I'm going to take your gun before it does any more damage."

Red Payette took three quick steps to the left, so that he was farther away from Blake. Blake's right hand hovered close to his holster.

"Stop right where you are, law dog!" he cried.

Benton ignored the command.

GOLL stepped aside, and Benton guessed instantly that Goll or Payette would make the first draw, would attempt a sneak shot while Benton's attention was centered on Blake.

Then Mayor Mandel shouted, "Watch Payette!" and Benton saw the redhead's splayed fingers dart down.

The rest of it was automatic with Clay Benton. He drew with an effortless motion so smooth that it seemed almost slow, yet his gun was blasting before Payette had completed his sneak draw. Benton saw the shock of his slug knock Red Payette backward. The marshal heard a loud blast somewhere behind him and was wondering about that as he turned and, strangely, saw Blake go down in the grotesquely disjointed way a dead man falls. Benton heard Goll call out, "I'm out of it—don't shoot!"

Benton observed then that Goll wasn't addressing him. The Riley rider was staring across the street.

Utterly astonished and bewildered, Benton turned and saw John Stuart standing on the hotel veranda with a smoking Winchester in his hands. Then Clay Benton understood why Goll had quit and why Jack Blake was lying dead in Main Street's dust.

John Stuart, who believed that a gun should not be toted unless intended for use, had used the Winchester on Blake to avenge little Jeff.

Almost at once the street was crowded with people. A man slapped Benton on the shoulder.

"That was slick shooting, Marshal," he said. "You cut Red down!"

Benton scarcely heard the praise. He called anxiously to Stuart, "How is Jeff?"

"Doc says he's going to live," John Stuart said.

"Thank God!" Benton exclaimed.

Then he pushed through the crowd to where Linda stood.

"You can cry on my shoulder if you like," he told her.

She came into the comforting circle of his arms. But she didn't cry.

"I'm so thankful you didn't have to do it, Clay," she said. "It would have been a barrier between us. I've been alone so long."

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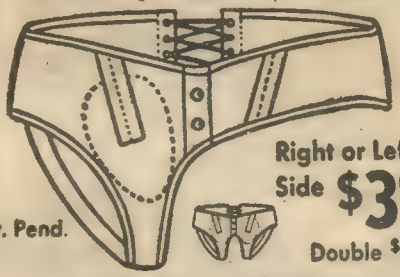

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(Continued from page 6)

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The Greene outfit ran between 23,000 and 25,000 head of mother cows (2 year-old heifers up to 9 year-olds) which means that with the steer herd, they'd be running anywhere from 45,000 to 65,000 head all told. Their saddle band numbered around 2,000 horses.

The ranch, Doyle explained, worked in seven divisions, each division composed of 6 to 10 riders who ranked second to none as brush-poppers.

But times have changed in Cattleland and there aren't many of the old breed left—the men like Bill Greene and Tom Doyle who'd back a hand with everything he had.

Another Old-Timer

Speaking of the "old breed" reminds me of a visit I had a while back with Ace Gardner who has worn a law badge off and on for upwards of 30 years and is now deputy sheriff at Coolidge, Ariz. A wiry, strong-muscled man who was born on his father's ranch in Texas "so dang long ago I dis-remember the exact date," Gardner trailed 23 head of horses from Texas to Arizona in 1898.

"The trip took two m o n t h s by way of Horsehead Crossing on the Pecos, through Las Cruces to Lordsburg and up the San Simon Valley to old Fort Bowie," Gardner explained. "It ended at the Riggs Ranch in the Chiricahua Mountains of Arizona. The country has sure changed considerable since then."

That was b e f o r e the Arizona Rangers under Burt Mossman had fought it out with the Wild Bunch which caused Arizona to be known as a Rustler's Paradise. Such notorious outlaws as Bert Alvord and Billy Styles were riding high. The latter, according to Ace, was a "little feller who looked more like a college boy than a bandit."

Another of the owlhoot fraternity whom Gardner knew personally was Black Jack

Ketchum. "His right name was Tom Ketchum and I met him before he went bronc. That was back in Texas when I was just a button. My mother was doctoring a thorn wound in my foot that had festered bad and was givin' me a lot of misery. Tom Ketchum stopped by the ranch and when my maw remarked how she wished she had a particular kind of salve they had in town, Tom said he'd go fetch it.

"That was a thirty mile round trip on a real cold winter night. Along with the salve Tom brought me a jew's-harp as a gift. It sure seems odd that such a kind-hearted feller would turn into one of the worst killers in the whole Southwest."

Guns and Gunmen

Ace got his picture in the papers a long time ago when he corraled four desperate horse-thieves near Palo Verde on the Colorado River. Although there was considerable shooting, the nearest Ace got to a bullet was when a slug broke a tree branch so close to his head that it scratched his cheek.

Another time Ace and a companion trailed two bank robbers from Blythe, on the Arizona-California border, all the way to Holtville in Imperial Valley—a distance of 125 miles—and cornered them in the Franklin Hotel with a money sack containing $5,000.

Gardner has a collection of 62 guns, ranging from long-barreled rifles to hide-out derringers, and a double-barreled scattergun that once belonged to Billy Styles.

Although he still wears the cowboy garb he's always worn and totes a gun, Ace thinks the West is downright tame compared to what it used to be. "Some of them old-timey outlaws didn't look or talk like they was tough, and most of 'em didn't brag much. But when it came to a case of grab or git, they mostly grabbed."

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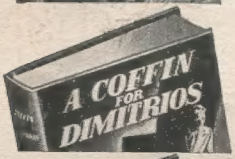

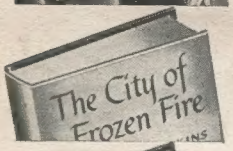

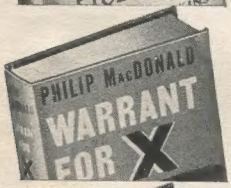

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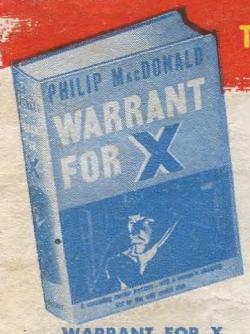

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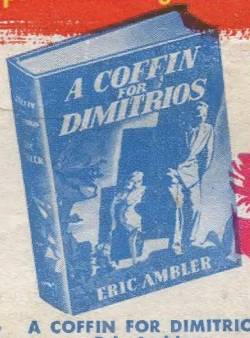

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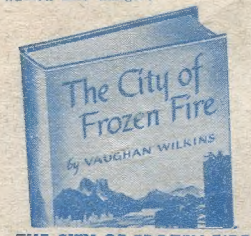

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